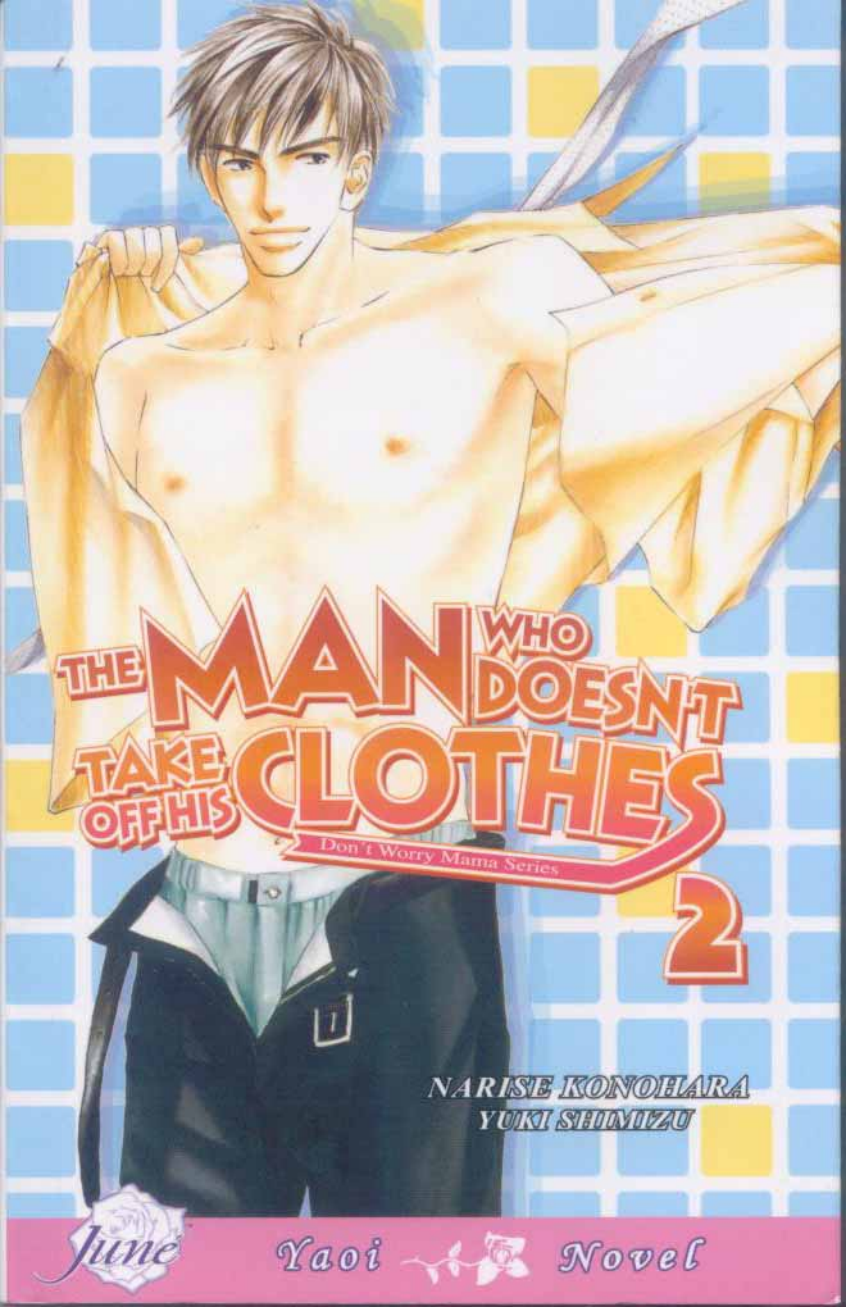




THE **MAN** WHO DOESN'T
TAKE OFF HIS CLOTHES

Don't Worry Mama Series

2

NARISE KONOELARA
YUKI SHIMIZU

June

Yaoi



Novel

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*"You don't want me inside you?"
Kaitani implored with upturned eyes...*

After using family connections to land a job at a major cosmetics company, Kaitani has finally found work that will help him prove his worth! But Fujiwara, Kaitani's drop-dead handsome but arrogant boss, is mercilessly focused on crushing Kaitani's enthusiasm for a brand-new product line. When Kaitani quickly charges ahead with a plan to take advantage of a chink in Fujiwara's armor, fierce emotions with dragon-like strength rear up and lay claim to Kaitani's heart! Can he fight hard and long enough to get the message across to his snobbish boss, or will this battle end with a devastating body count?

The Man Who Doesn't Take Off His Clothes is a tailor-made tale of hopeless longing and hilarious one-upmanship! Young Kaitani is taking his first, tentative steps up the steep corporate ladder...but his boss, Section Chief Fujiwara, pushes harder and harder against him with every passing day. Is their snarling rivalry hiding a secret that one of them doesn't have the balls to reveal? The working world is cutthroat enough without romance on the agenda. Will these two men learn to work for love, or will their overtime antics leave them beat?



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“You don’t want me inside you?”
Kaitani implored with upturned eyes.



Chapter 1

Every day for the last three days, Kaitani had received an email from Fujiwara requesting his cost reduction proposals. But Kaitani simply glanced at the email and didn't reply.

He was quietly slaving away at his desk when Osada's voice rang out behind him. "Have you presented your cost reduction proposals to the Section Chief? I seem to recall distributing those memos a full week ago."

Kaitani shook his head wordlessly.

"Even if you don't have a concrete plan yet, do you at least have a goal in-mind?" she said, her tone growing more and more severe with each word.

"It's, um, proving difficult—"

"It's proving difficult for everyone. The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday of next week. You'd better hurry."

"I will, but—"

The heels of Osada's shoes clicked on the floor, signaling her irritation. "If you're finding some aspect of this difficult, then ask the people around you for their opinions. The Section Chief told me to speak to you since you're not answering his emails. What the hell is going on?!"

Kaitani lowered his head slightly and groaned to himself, as if he were being burdened with somebody else's problems.

"What are you moaning about? Buckle down and do the work you've been assigned." She spoke in a loud-enough voice that everybody nearby turned and looked at them with startled expressions.

"I'm sorry," Kaitani said, bowing his head and apologizing. Osada didn't reply and went back to her desk.

He ate lunch in the company cafeteria and returned to the office a little after one. Because some more time had passed and her disposition might have improved somewhat, Kaitani said to Osada, "Um, excuse me," but she pretended he wasn't even there.

Osada was radiating a bad vibe thick enough to cut with a knife. Being in the same room as her was so unpleasant that he considered taking his work somewhere else for the rest of the day. He'd stood and picked up his briefcase when he heard his name being called.

He swallowed hard, flinching as he turned around. The man who hadn't said a word to him in the last two weeks addressed him. "Before you leave, I need to talk to you."

Because Kaitani hadn't submitted his cost reduction proposals, no doubt about it. He stood in front of Fujiwara. He knew what was coming, but he'd do his best to lend an attentive ear. "What's this about?"

"I've sent you any number of emails on the subject. What is the status of your cost reductions?"

Fujiwara was saying exactly what Kaitani expected him to say, yet the question hit him like a blast out of the frozen Arctic.

"I haven't made any progress."

Fujiwara pressed his right hand against his forehead and sighed. "If you aren't making any progress, then you aren't making any progress. The purpose of my email was to obtain an assessment of where things stood."

"I'm sorry..."

Fujiwara leaned forward and raised his head, his eyes blazing with exasperation. Kaitani's palms went clammy. "If you cannot reach your cost reduction targets, do you understand the nature of whatever problems are preventing you from doing so?"

"Um, well, that's—" Kaitani's throat went bone dry under the cross-examination. He was left to hem and haw and then finally answer, "I don't know. I've looked at things from a lot of different angles, but I honestly can't get a handle on it."

"You mean to tell me that you've let days go by without knowing what to do?" Fujiwara spoke slowly and emphatically, enunciating the sentence word-by-word. Kaitani couldn't deny it. When he remained silent, Fujiwara sniffed through his nose. "You did a mighty fine job of twisting arms and getting your design approved, and now you're going to leave the job half-undone? Unbelievable."

"But you're asking me to do the impossible! How am I supposed to reach the high targets you gave me when the design involves every aspect of the product?"

"If you felt that the targets were too high to achieve, why didn't you consult with others, or with me? What do you imagine the whole point of teamwork is?"

Ah, Kaitani thought to himself, but now he was closing the barn doors long after the horse had bolted. What Fujiwara was saying was right: he'd completely failed to follow through.

"Even if you say I should consult with you—" Kaitani glanced at him with upturned eyes. "The atmosphere around here isn't exactly conducive to—"

Fujiwara slammed his fist on the desk with a bang, sending a shiver up Kaitani's back. "The atmosphere isn't conducive to what? You're not a kid living at home or attending grade school," he roared. "This is a workplace! Our primary concern isn't with your self-esteem!"

Everybody in the vicinity jumped, suddenly aware of the Section Chief's heightened state of agitation. Fujiwara came to his feet. "Follow me," he spat out, and left the office. Kaitani shuffled after him.

"I haven't the slightest idea what is going through your mind."

They were standing in the reference room, just the two of them. For a brief moment, Kaitani's heart leapt. Then the door closed, and Fujiwara whirled around and yelled, "You go so far as to blackmail me to get that dragon design approved, and all of a sudden you don't give a damn? You say you don't understand your job, and yet you don't seek a second opinion? If you really don't give a damn, what good are you? Why don't you resign?"

Kaitani couldn't come up with the words to respond. "I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head.

"I don't need any token contriteness from you. I want you to do. I want you to think. I want results!"

Fujiwara's unsparing words beat him about the head and shoulders. He really didn't have a clue, and so he'd kept putting things off until later. But even here he had a good excuse.

"A thirty yen cost reduction is impossible. Why is my quota so disproportionate heavy? I already significantly reduced the unit cost when you first said you had your doubts about it. But nobody else on the staff shares your misgivings. Far from it; doesn't everybody think this will be a winner?" Fujiwara's expression, suffused with nothing but anger, wavered a bit. Kaitani went on. "You only care about your own concerns. The one laying these unreasonable demands on us is you!"

They glared at each other in silence. Fujiwara was the first one to look away. "If you're got a problem with the way I do things, take yourself off the project, the sooner the better."

As much as Kaitani was in love with Fujiwara, at times like this, he hated him with a similar intensity. He shrugged. "Oh, that again. Every time I resist you in the slightest, you tell me to resign, or tell me I'm not up for the job. You aren't interested in the opinions of your subordinates. You run this place like your own private fiefdom."

The veins throbbed in Fujiwara's forehead. "If I find the opinions of my subordinates useful, then I'll adopt them. You go spouting off about how great this or

that is with no basis in fact whatsoever. I'm the one in charge here. And whoever's in charge has a certain way of doing things. I'm not about to let this project fail."

Kaitani clenched his hands into fists and raised his voice. "You have a lot to say, but in the final analysis you're all about sales, all about watching your own back, aren't you?" His breath grew ragged. Once again headed into a stalemate, they stared at each other in silence.

"Osada has a project in the works, a line of anti-aging skin care products for women." Fujiwara's tone of voice grew quieter, and Kaitani had no idea why he'd suddenly brought up Osada's name. "I think the prospects are good, but it'll debut after KASHA. If KASHA fails, the higher-ups are naturally going to have cold feet when it comes to the next new product. If Osada's project doesn't get the go-ahead—or even if it does—it will likely be delayed years. And if R&D fails with their new lotion texture, we won't see another like it for five years—a decade if it proves a real disaster. And if this novel container design proves unsuccessful, that studio we commissioned is unlikely to get work from us again."

Fujiwara paused. "I am responsible for everybody related to this product. If you screw up, you can just shrug it off, but that risk is still going to be born by the company and everybody else."

Kaitani felt as if his head had just been dunked in ice water. So far, as an underling, he hadn't held any position of responsibility. He'd merely done his best to pull his own weight. That's why he hadn't given any thought to what risks might arise out of his own demands.

"You found a way to coerce the acceptance of the dragon design. Despite your high-handed manner, I came around to seeing it as a good direction in which to press forward. This time, out of my belief that we positively cannot fail, I know that I am acting more conservatively than necessary."

Fujiwara combed his right hand through his perfectly undisturbed hair. "There are many in the company who like the dragon design and the lotion texture. However, it's the customer who ultimately decides whether or not to buy the product. The customer doesn't see how diligently we try, or how much effort we expend. Regardless of what we produce with all our hard work, that won't guarantee a single sale. That's why I want added value. The retail price is that added value. Beyond the fixed costs, there's nothing more we can do with the product itself. You say that a thirty-yen cost reduction is impossible. But I did not calculate that thirty yen target without good grounds for doing so. I distributed the reduction targets to the department heads based on what I believed was possible."

Kaitani bowed his head, clenching his fists so tightly that his fingernails left marks in his palms. This was mortifying; mortifying beyond belief, so much so that if he'd been alone, he would have thrown his defeated body into the nearest river. He'd willfully acted based on what he could see around him and had branded Fujiwara the bad guy. But Fujiwara wasn't a self-centered tyrant, the unthinking automaton, the money-grubbing Mr. Scrooge thinking only of profits.

Kaitani had just wanted to turn off his brain and

tough it out. But he was wrong. Dead wrong. Now he pushed his thoughts back and tried putting everything else in perspective.

He remembered the summer of his senior year in high school, when they'd lost in the first qualifying round of the national baseball tournament. The game had gone into extra innings, and in the end, his team was eliminated. It was so deeply frustrating, standing there on home base, weeping, hearing the umpire call the last out. But it wasn't embarrassing. He'd done all he could, he'd tried with all that was in him, and that was nothing to be embarrassed about.

What he found so mortifying now was the knowledge that he was running away from his problems. Without giving his all, he knew he'd produced nothing but a half-assed effort.

"Aaarrggh!" Kaitani clenched his fists and screamed loudly. He ground his back teeth and clamped his mouth shut. Holding his face in both hands, he smacked himself on one cheek and then the other. Fully psyched, he glanced at Fujiwara, who had taken a careful step backwards and was looking at him with wide eyes.

"I completely failed to take the Section Chief's feelings into account, and I'm sorry for carrying on in such a selfish manner." Kaitani didn't doubt in the slightest that he was in the wrong. "Please instruct me as to the best way to proceed," he said, and bowed. Prepared not to raise his head until he received an answer, he stared at the tips of Fujiwara's polished leather shoes.

"Before begging for someone to teach you, how about you investigate the matter further yourself?"

The stinging words rained down on him.
"Because I don't know what to do next."

"Don't you have any pride at all?"

The question was a dagger in his chest. The sensation was so painful, shameful, and embarrassing that he wanted to run right out of there. But if he did, he could never live with himself. Lose by default, and he'd never get a second chance. "Whatever's left of my pride isn't worth anything to me now. There isn't enough time, and I don't want to cause anybody any more grief. That's why I'm asking you."

After a long silence, Fujiwara said in a low voice, "Look at me."

Chapter 2

From the next day onward, the ordinary ways in which Kaitani spent his day-to-day life completely changed. Fujiwara gave him some general hints about where he should be looking to make the cost reductions, but he didn't give him any precise answers.

Based on these ballpark ideas, Kaitani poured through the historical data. He hadn't ever studied this hard before or read so many books, even for his college entrance exams. Yet the more he read, the more things kept piling up that he didn't understand. And in order to understand those things, he had no choice but to crack the books again and study even more.

When he didn't understand something, admitting his ignorance was usually the end of the matter. But now, having plunged into a brand-new ocean of knowledge, he could only stand dumbfounded in the midst of the great depths.

Because he had his job to do during the day, he had to study after hours. He was running out of time; there weren't enough hours in the day. He stood and read on the train to and from work. For lunch, he ate with a convenience store onigiri in one hand, turning pages with the other.

"Hey, Kaitani, what's up?"

"What . . . oh, I'm doing a little Internet research."

It was after lunch, and Osada stood behind

Kaitani with a funny expression on her face. She was trying to keep from laughing but her shoulders trembled.

"Faster using both hands, don't you think?"

When she said that, Kaitani remembered to look at his left hand. He'd been searching the web while eating onigiri for lunch, become engrossed in what he was doing, and forgot to finish it. He stuffed the rest into his mouth.

"You've really been working hard lately."

He scratched at the back of his head. "I let things slide before, and now I have to pay the piper."

"All this diligence is admirable, but don't overdue it."

"Yeah," he answered. Except that he had the feeling if he slacked off even a little, he'd never make the cost reduction targets. He finally felt like the answer was within his grasp. Just a bit more, a bit more, he thought, and his spirits lifted. He was getting impatient.

With all the new information he'd crammed into his brain securely in his hands, Kaitani was finally prepared to begin paring away at the cost structure for bottles used for the KASHA line. He'd arranged for all the steel containers to be manufactured at the plant in China. Previously, while wrangling over the design itself, he'd developed a working relationship with the head engineer at the China plant, and so their discussions went smoothly. The next day, he sent Kaitani a cost reduction proposal along with the related aggregate totals. However, and to an astonishing degree, his numbers were nowhere near the targets Kaitani had set for himself.

Kaitani looked more closely at the raw materials. He queried the paint and ink vendors, asking for the lowest prices they could give him. The rep from the manufacturing division had initially been reluctant to switch suppliers they'd used for many years. But on Kaitani's third phone call, as if bowing to his enthusiasm for the dragon design, he took an active interest in the project.

As the meeting drew near, it became inconvenient to get in touch with people from his apartment. With all the time he spent commuting going to waste, Kaitani started staying overnight at work. Crashing at the office had originally been declared strictly against the rules, but before a new product rollout, or when things got busy at the end of the fiscal year, there was a tacit understanding that all-nighters would be tolerated. Kaitani brought a sleeping bag and bedded down in the reference room. In the morning, he washed up in the lavatory. There wasn't a shower available, but he did change his undershorts on a daily basis.

During the nights he camped out at the office, he got to know the old hand who manned the security station. In the morning, Kaitani would send him a cup of hot miso soup as a thank-you. At first, he more or less slept at night, but with two days to go before the meeting he hardly had the time to go to the bathroom, let alone sleep. To make matters worse, the revised budget projections hadn't arrived from the China plant. He couldn't finalize his own reports without them, so he created a general outline to handle the data while he waited for the plant to get in touch with him.

The engineer at the China plant finally contacted him the night before the meeting; it was after eight o'clock. The newly submitted target figures were only a bit under the projected budget proposal. In high spirits, Kaitani entered the numbers into the spreadsheet he'd already created.

Having saved everything, he only had to print out a copy and make a handful of additional copies. I've done it, he thought. In that same moment, all the energy left his body. He was overcome with drowsiness. It was the middle of the night. He'd have to turn on the copy machine and wait for it to warm up; that much could wait until tomorrow. The meeting was scheduled for the afternoon, and all he needed was ten minutes. He'd do the printouts tomorrow, too. Yes, tomorrow. With these thoughts on circling in his mind, he collapsed in front of the desk he was working at and completely zonked out.

Past 7:30 the next morning, after some Richter-scale shaking, the old security guard woke him up. Once Kaitani had washed his face and eaten breakfast at a nearby convenience store, it was almost eight. Hoping to be at work when Fujiwara arrived, he went to brush his teeth and comb his hair, but when he returned at ten after the hour, Fujiwara had arrived and booted up his computer.

Kaitani went back to his desk and looked at his notebook computer. "Huh?" he thought. The screen was dark. He didn't recall turning off the computer the night before, after he had finished formatting the data. Wondering what was going on, he again pressed the power button, but the computer didn't make a sound.

His stomach froze. He repeatedly tried booting up the computer until one of the junior staffers sitting opposite him asked him what was wrong.

"Something's messed-up with my computer. It won't turn on."

"Eh? Really?"

She looked at his work station. If the hard disk had crashed—the thought alone made him shiver. Days of sweat, blood, and tears had come to naught. Kaitani tried over and over, attempting to coax the machine into starting. "C'mon, you can do it," he begged, as if were a reluctant child. The heartless machine silently refused to comply.

"I had a computer that acted like that before, and it turned out the hard disk crashed and had to be replaced."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Osada standing behind him. "Replaced? But what happened to the data on the disk?"

"It was pretty much toast."

The world in front of his eyes went black. If the drive was fried, that meant all his data had flown the coop and was never coming back. Gone forever. As Kaitani stared at the dark computer screen, dumbfounded, the regular morning meeting began. The office manager spoke for an unusually long time, but Kaitani didn't register a word of what she said. The only thing on his mind was his crashed computer. No, he actually didn't care about the computer itself; all that mattered was the data on the drive. He had to have it for the meeting that afternoon—the manuscript for his cost reduction

proposal.

The same time the office manager finished with her little speech, Kaitani called the IT support department. "I've got two support incidents this morning," the technician told him. "I can fit you in this afternoon at one o'clock."

"You've got to come now!" he pleaded, and persuaded the man to schedule a visit right away.

Kaitani held his breath and stared at the technician's back while he examined the computer. The conclusion he came to was Kaitani's worst-case scenario: "I can't say without taking it back to the lab for a closer look."

At ten o'clock, his computer was hauled away. Kaitani asked them to get right on it, but the technician didn't know how long the repairs would take. Everybody in the Sales Planning & Promotion department was provided with a computer, but there wasn't even a single spare unit. If the computer was broken beyond repair, he would be given a new one. At this stage, though, that was hardly a satisfactory solution.

Kaitani practically crawled to Fujiwara's desk, his face a death mask. "I need to go home right now."

Fujiwara slowly raised his eyes. "Why?"

"My computer crashed and is out for repairs. I'd like to go get my own."

"Call Purchasing and see if they have a spare. If they do, borrow one of theirs for the time being. You'll have to fill out a requisition form, and even if they have a spare on hand, it'll probably take until noon to process the paperwork—"

If it took until noon, there was no way he'd have enough time before the one o'clock meeting. "Um, then is it okay if I leave now? I have to resurrect the documents for today's meeting."

A crease formed between Fujiwara's eyebrows. "And what do you mean by resurrect? What documents for today's meeting? Didn't you back up your data?"

The truth was too painful to admit out-loud. His lips pressed together, Kaitani nodded his head. "I didn't think that the hard disk would crash."

"Computers are not infallible. You've been told to keep a backup of your data in a location other than your hard disk because of times like this. You say you want to resurrect your documents and data, but do you really think you can get the job done in-time? Today's meeting starts at one o'clock."

"I'll do as much as I can."

Fujiwara sighed. He set the items in his hands down on the desk with a thump. "Why must you always behave so irresponsibly? You've been working quite diligently lately, but you still can't close the deal when it counts."

"I-I'm not behaving irresponsibly!"

"If you had done what you've been told to do, this kind of thing wouldn't have happened."

Fujiwara had often instructed them to back up their data just in case something happened to the hard disk. But up until now, nothing bad had ever happened to one of Kaitani's computers, and making incremental backups was a bother, so he never did it.

"I didn't make a backup, but I did my job exactly

the way I was supposed to. I just finished compiling all the data!"

"Either things are ready when you need them, or they're not. And if they're not, the rest hardly matters."

"But—"

"Enough with the childish excuses," thundered Fujiwara. "Take some responsibility for your own mistakes."

Kaitani clammed up and ground his back teeth. He was in the wrong, no doubt about it. If he'd only taken a minute or two and saved his work, this wouldn't be happening to him.

"I'm sorry."

"All in all, you—"

Kaitani felt the corners of his eyes growing hot and quickly lowered his head. He pressed his palms against his face, but the tears threaded the gaps between his hands in drips and drops. He was miserable, mortified, embarrassed beyond belief. His shoulders shook as he drew hiccupping breaths. With him blubbering on like this, Fujiwara was surely going to say something, if only to scold him further.

Fujiwara heaved too many sighs to count, each sigh stabbing Kaitani in the chest.

"Use this one." Hardly moving his head at all, Kaitani saw what Fujiwara was holding out in his hand. A small notebook computer. "It's my backup machine. I hardly ever use it. It should suffice to rebuild the amount of data you have."

Fujiwara's offer to loan him his own laptop so surprised Kaitani that he didn't extend his hand to take it.



"Well, hurry up," Fujiwara snapped. "The documents you sent to me earlier are still on the mail server, so I'll forward you a copy. But you're going to have to recompile the data starting from square one."

"T-Thank you," said Kaitani, taking the laptop.

He returned to his desk. Pausing only to consider how strange it was that even Fujiwara had such a kind side to him, he set to resurrecting his reports. He emailed the engineer at the China plant, explained the situation, and had him resend the cost reduction budget projections. With the help of Osada and a junior staffer, they prepared the charts and graphs.

At 12:15, he finally printed out the completed document. The junior staffer quickly ran the copier and collated the copies.

At 12:50, Kaitani grabbed the finished materials in one hand, flew out of the office, and raced down the hallway toward the conference room.

Chapter 3

The meeting ended at three o'clock and Kaitani went back to the office. Arriving there just ahead of him, Osada and the junior staffer were having a pleasant chat together. The junior staffer caught Kaitani's eye and laughed in a meaningful way.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Osaka-san told me an interesting story."

"An interesting story?"

Osada stepped in at that point. "Nothing important. Just that at the meeting, your stomach was growling the whole time you were presenting your cost reduction proposal."

Kaitani cast his thoughts back to the meeting and suddenly blushed. The meeting had gone great at first. Amidst the department heads who, one after the other, had failed to meet their quotas, his announcement that he had met and surpassed his targets attracted a good deal of notice. He had really outdone himself this time, he thought, basking in the adulation.

But when he was giving his presentation—that's when it happened. All of a sudden, his stomach started growling. He put his best face on, but a woman in R&D put her hand over her mouth and giggled, and when he glanced to the side, he could see the veins bulging on Fujiwara's forehead.

"Don't talk about things like that in front of the staff," he pouted to Osada.

His computer's hard disk breakdown had really challenged him, but he'd made it to the meeting just under the wire. That was a great feeling. If only his stomach hadn't acted up halfway through. Shut up! he'd told himself. Cut it out! But this was something willpower alone could not accomplish.

"If you're so hungry, you should eat this. It's from my emergency stores."

Kaitani jumped at the offer of the chocolate granola bar. He almost swooned as he gobbled it down, but he quickly became aware of a pair of eyes fastened on him. Osada was looking at him with an affectionate expression on her face.

"Kaitani—"

The look made him think, presumptuously, that perhaps Osada had a thing for him. But then the sweet feelings welled up in his breast—there was already somebody he was in love with.

"You look like my little pet doggie going after his meal. Show him a tasty tidbit and he'll jump all over you and wolf it down."

Kaitani hung his head as he crumpled up the granola bar wrapper in his right hand. So I'm no better than a dog? he started to ask, but checked himself. He had a feeling she'd say yes.

Fujiwara returned to the office. He had stayed behind after the meeting to talk to the R&D department head. Osada and Kaitani went to their desks, and Kaitani tossed the granola bar wrapper in the trash and wiped off

his hands.

"Kaitani-kun," Fujiwara called out, as soon as got back. Kaitani got the feeling that his obnoxious stomach hadn't gone unnoticed. In a gloomy mood, he stood in front of the Section Chief's desk.

Fujiwara glanced at his watch. "For the next half-hour, that is, until 3:40, get yourself something to eat."

The words didn't register. "Huh?" Kaitani said.

"Go out and buy yourself a meal. I really don't want to listen to your stomach growling all the rest of the afternoon."

"But my break time—"

Fujiwara glared at him.

"Thank you," Kaitani hurriedly said, and turned on his heels. He got his wallet and left the office. He only had thirty minutes, so he stopped at a nearby gyudon shop (serving rice covered with beef and vegetables marinated in a sweet soy sauce). He stuffed himself and satisfied his appetite.

Fujiwara had been mad at him for not backing up his files, but then had lent him his own laptop. He knew he was hungry, and so sent him out to a restaurant. Fujiwara could be a nicer person than he had thought. No, he was a nice guy. As his stomach filled, so did his spirits. He was suddenly in a very good mood.

Until the Purchasing department delivered a new computer, Kaitani did his work on Fujiwara's laptop. Obviously, he did not forget to back up his data. That afternoon at five o'clock, just before closing, the replacement computer arrived from the Purchasing

department, and he returned the laptop to Fujiwara.

"Thank you for letting me use your computer. It was a lifesaver."

"And by that, I hope you mean to say it won't happen again." With that parting shot, he put the computer back in the drawer.

Though it was past six, Kaitani quietly tended to the work he'd set aside that morning to work on his presentation. Fujiwara also seemed to have some pressing task he needed to get done. By seven, they still hadn't left work. Their colleagues left one by one. Eventually, Kaitani and Fujiwara were the only ones there.

Kaitani finished around eight o'clock and turned off his replacement computer. Fujiwara apparently finished at the same time and began straightening up his desk. If Fujiwara was thinking of leaving, then it'd be okay for him to take off, too. But Kaitani didn't get up right away and lingered a while longer.

He waited for Fujiwara to leave and tagged after him. They stood together in front of the elevators, and Kaitani glanced at the man next to him. Fujiwara looked up at the floor indicator lights and didn't speak.

"Um, Section Chief—"

Fujiwara looked at him.

"I'm really grateful for everything you've done for me today."

"No problem," he replied shortly.

"We still haven't eaten dinner. Want to get something before heading back? On me, my way of saying thanks."

With a bing! the elevator doors opened. Fujiwara got on first, Kaitani after him.

"So, what kind of trap are you planning to spring on me this time?"

With just the two of them inside the little descending room, the deeply suspicious tones in the question rattled Kaitani.

"N-Nothing at all. This time, I really would just like to express my gratitude."

Fujiwara took a quick breath. "Thank you, but I must respectfully decline. I did not mean to suggest any untoward motives on your part."

The cold sarcasm in his words struck home. Kaitani wanted to apologize and thank him. That was the reason he was asking him out. My treat, was all he was saying. "Miss Personality, you ain't," he muttered under his breath.

Fujiwara's countenance suddenly changed. The man must have the ears of a bat. "Considering the train wreck that is your character, you're hardly in the position to make such an assessment."

Around the office, Fujiwara managed to maintain the aura of the calm and composed superior. But in private, the mask peeled away and he revealed his emotional, hot-tempered side.

"I told you I was grateful, so why don't you believe me?"

Fujiwara laughed through his nose. "Should I? After you used those disgusting photographs to blackmail me? If you want to be trusted, you'll have to show me some proof that you are, actually, trustworthy."

The conversation had now become a bit bombastic, but Kaitani only wished to express his thankfulness by buying dinner. He had no other particular expectations. The current ratio of shittiness to gratitude was about nine-to-one.

The elevator filled with an uncertain, tense air. At this moment, he was determined to take the bloke out to dinner come hell or high water, even if it meant falling back on his aforementioned bad habits.

"I'm heading out to a tavern after this, and if you don't come with, then I'll just have to send those compromising pictures to everyone."

"You son of a bitch..."

Kaitani could actually hear Fujiwara grinding his back teeth. His shoulders trembled.

"Look, I'm being on the level, dammit. So quit complaining and just come along with me."

Fujiwara gave him the same look a dog might right before taking a bite out of his ass. But in the end he spat out, "Whatever you want."

Chapter 4

Passing the gyudon shop next to the station, Fujiwara said, "How about there? Looks like a nice place."

It pissed Kaitani off, the way he was so obvious about getting the meal over and done with.

Once they'd gone by the gyudon shop, Fujiwara said, dropping the name of a famous French restaurant, "I quite enjoy the roast lamb at the David Hotel. You know, they cook it in the style of Les Pres d'Eugenie."

Kaitani knew it was a high-class establishment, with equally high prices. He felt like knocking Fujiwara's block off. "Sorry, but my palate is not accustomed to such refined fare."

With that, they came to a tavern at the outskirts of the retail business district. As soon as they entered the establishment, Fujiwara said, "Not exactly spick-and-span."

Kaitani felt his checks twitch. The tatami-mat rooms in the small restaurant were divided up with folding screens. The only customer, a man at the booth in the back, was carrying on a bit too loudly.

"Two beers and dashimaki tamago omelet roll. Plus, fried plums stuffed with minced chicken, pickled white radish harihari salad, and pork cutlets grilled with miso and vegetables."

He ordered as they were shown to a table on the

tatami mats, and placed the menu on the floor behind him. Fujiwara fixed Kaitani with a look. "You are presuming to order on my behalf?"

"Well, I don't know if anything would meet with your approval. For now, I'm only ordering what I happen to like. Want to look?" he asked sarcastically, handing him the menu.

Fujiwara snatched it from him. As he examined the menu, their beers arrived.

"Hey, lose the menu. Cheers!"

Fujiwara reluctantly put down the menu. With obvious disdain, he clinked his mug against Kaitani's. Despite the man's annoying attitude, a cold beer after work really hit the spot. Even Fujiwara set aside his high-handed manner and drained half his glass. He took another look at the menu.

"What about this spinach and tofu, dressed with miso sauce?"

"Yeah, that's delicious, too."

"And the beef stew?"

"Not so good. A little too greasy, in my opinion."

While they were talking, the dashimaki tamago and pickled white radish harihari salad arrived. Fujiwara plucked a slice of the dashimaki off the dish. He tried a bite and mumbled to himself, "Delicious."

"Isn't it? The dashimaki dishes are great here."

I'll be damned, the look on Fujiwara's face said, and he quickly lowered his head.

"The salad's good, too. Here, try some."

Seeing Fujiwara's chopsticks hesitate, Kaitani

divided the plate in two and placed it down in front of him. "I've been coming to this restaurant since I was in school. As you observed, it's not exactly pretty, but the entrees are top-notch. For the price, the taste can't be beat."

Starting in on the salad, Fujiwara had no comment. He didn't speak, but he ate with a gusto that left no other conclusion but that he found the fare delicious. Kaitani found sharing something he loved with somebody he cared for very enjoyable. He added to the order the spinach and tofu dish that Fujiwara had expressed an interest in.

"Ah, what do you want to drink?" Kaitani asked as soon as he noticed that Fujiwara's glass was empty. Fujiwara asked for chilled sake. "You've impressed me as a wine connoisseur. But I guess you like sake, too."

"I eat Italian and French cuisine a lot when I dine out, and naturally that kind of food goes well with wine. But I enjoy all kinds of liquors."

"I'm pretty much a beer man. I like white wine, too. But red wine strikes me as a bit too vivid, too raw."

Fujiwara smiled, narrowing his eyes. "Don't you appreciate its sensuousness?" he asked with a chuckle. His low voice and the provocative expression on his face sent a shiver up Kaitani's back. "You're still young, so perhaps that's why you don't yet appreciate the finer points of a quality red wine."

His lips parted to take a long, sigh-like breath, and Kaitani's throat gulped in an unnatural fashion. Those lips had spoken his name so many times, begged for so many kisses; kisses that made his mind go numb.

The waiter soon brought the sake to the table. While sipping the chilled drink, Fujiwara picked at the pork cutlets. Even in this dingy little restaurant, stabbing at a piece of meat, Fujiwara was beautiful. His always-composed countenance had only now begun to relax, and the way he stretched out his legs was cute somehow.

Kaitani wanted to sleep with him: that's the thought that clearly surfaced in his mind. Fujiwara was older, disagreeable, and damned high maintenance, but Kaitani wanted to be with him. He wanted to take him to his bed, strip off his clothes, kiss him, hold him, and then—

"You've gotten quiet all of a sudden. What's up?"

He was all the more alluring when a touch of color came to his eyes. Kaitani's throat went as dry as the Sahara. "Oh, nothing. Just thinking about everything you've done for me."

He drained a second glass of beer. His body was suddenly on fire. The alarm bells of his desire clanged inside his head, but that wasn't the reason he had brought Fujiwara out to dinner.

"At first, I had no interest at all in doing those cost reductions; I didn't think it was possible. But after you called me out on the carpet, I came to my senses. I put my shoulder to the wheel, and actually began enjoying my job." He scratched his head. "I didn't know how out-of-my-depth I was, but at the time, I didn't take things very seriously, despite being told to get on with it. I originally wasn't interested in cosmetics. People gave me an earful, and though it was pretty harsh, I really

started using my head. Now, I consider myself very fortunate for getting chewed-out so thoroughly."

He faced Fujiwara and bowed his head. "Considering everything I've done, you might not believe me now when I tell you this, but I admire you. I'm being completely serious. That's what I wanted you to know."

He'd said what he wanted to say. When he raised his head, their wandering eyes met and Fujiwara awkwardly averted his gaze. He reached for the chilled sake and gulped it down like water.

"Limiting the scope of this conversation to work, your cost reduction proposal was a piece of feasible, concrete work. I've also been staying in close contact with the plant engineer."

"You really helped out with the design as well. We were able to get acquainted—"

"You got off to a slow start, and for a while I had no idea how things were going to end up, but you turned it around pretty quickly."

Kaitani got the feeling Fujiwara was praising him, but he wasn't convinced.

Fujiwara noticed and asked, "What's with that expression on your face?"

Kaitani pressed at the back of his head with the palm of his head. "Oh, nothing. It just, I haven't heard you...compliment me like that before."

"I've got no problem praising good work."

Fujiwara spoke matter-of-factly, but Kaitani felt a flower blooming in his breast. All the nights he camped out at the office and worked until dawn came back to

him. If he put in an honest effort, even he was deserving of praise. The thought of winning recognition filled his heart with such strong emotions that he could not speak. His eyes brimmed with tears.

Fujiwara's eyes opened wide. He stared at Kaitani, a surprised expression on his face. "What are you crying for?"

Kaitani wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Because I'm happy."

"You're a strange one," Fujiwara mumbled to himself. "I think about the last time you twisted my arm and took me to that strange establishment, and suddenly you're piling on the praise. I don't get it."

The words, "that strange establishment," caught Kaitani's attention. What strange establishment had he taken him to? He tilted his head to the side. Then it came to him: Belzard S, the bar Tomoharu ran.

"You appear to have no game plan, and your game play is a mess, but your passion perhaps merits praise. Thanks to my fear of failure, I probably play things too close to the vest."

Alternatively reproached and then praised, Kaitani couldn't understand whether, in sum, the implication was good or bad, but he wasn't getting a bad vibe off Fujiwara.

"The truth is I've had a lot of concerns about the KASHA skin care line. But of late, I'm feeling pretty optimistic about the rollout, even with the dragon design and the lotion viscosity being what it is."

Perhaps the sake was prompting Fujiwara to speak from his heart, but Kaitani was overjoyed. A smile

naturally came to his face. Fujiwara knit his brows. "Now what are you smiling about?"

"No, I mean, it's just really nice to be talking with you man-to-man."

Fujiwara brought the class of sake in his right hand to his mouth. "Don't worry about it. I know conversing with me isn't a pleasurable experience."

"That's not true."

Kaitani was happy that they could talk; that was what he really felt. Fujiwara smiled wryly, his expression stolid. "I know myself better than anything else. Ever since I was young, other men have disliked me."

He was handsome, good at his job, and he carried an air of arrogance that kept people at a distance. On top of that, the way he went through women one after the other was bound to rile up the men around him. As one such man, Kaitani believed from the very beginning that Fujiwara lived in a world completely apart from his own.

Fujiwara ordered another glass of chilled sake from a passing waiter and swept back his already perfectly coifed hair. Perhaps due to the alcohol, his fingertips turned a pretty pink color.

"I joined Cavi expecting that the odds of associating with men would be low. There were no men in the head office at the time. But more than avoiding men, it was because I thought that working alongside women would be easier. Nowadays, there are a number of male employees, including you."

Kaitani didn't understand how being surrounded

by women made work more enjoyable. In high school and college, he'd only hung out with other guys who were similarly obsessed with baseball. He'd dated girls now and then, which was enjoyable enough by itself, but the feelings of ease and solidarity he got from being with his teammates were completely different.

"Still, having mates around is good, too."

A brooding wrinkle suddenly appeared between Fujiwara's eyebrows. "Men are, in general, an insensitive and loutish lot. You are a representative sample, though I will admit that a certain devil-may-care attitude can make such relationships more relaxing than those with the opposite sex. Women are very delicate."

So, what it came down to was he equated relative indifference with being relaxed. But the notion of "enjoyment" still weighed on his mind. According to Fujiwara's calculations, the implication was that "taking a load off" equaled "not giving a damn."

It bothered Kaitani enough that he asked straight-out, "You think I'm a kick-back kind of guy?"

"When you used those photographs to threaten me, I frankly felt like killing you, but when I dug in my heels and answered back, and paid you the slightest compliment, you got all emotional and started crying. Well, it's like dealing with a child."

Being thought of as a child was an offensive thought. "Speaking of children, you don't have any, do you?"

"My two younger sisters do. My first sister's oldest daughter turns five this year. She's a precocious one. When I ask her what she wants for her birthday,

she says, 'A ring.' She already fancies herself all grown-up."

His eyes narrowed with delight as he thought about his doted-upon niece. Kaitani had never seen Fujiwara's niece before, but he was suddenly jealous. He wanted to be looked at with such affection.

"Excuse me, the customer who ordered the Jozen Mizu no Gotoshi sake?"

Fujiwara raised his right hand. The waiter put down the new glass and picked up the old one. After he left, Kaitani noticed another man there. He was standing in the middle of the aisle, staring in their direction, at Fujiwara. He looked a few years past thirty and wore a salaryman's navy blue suit. He was tall, and carried about him a stylish air. His face suggested Okinawan or Polynesian roots.

"You're Fujiwara, aren't you?"

The hand holding Fujiwara's glass suddenly began to tremble. He slowly turned. The Okinawan smiled at him; his teeth betrayed the yellow tint of a heavy smoker.

"Yes, it is! I was having myself a drink right next to you. Hey, I said to myself, I know I've heard that voice before. Long time no see, and all that. How many years has it been?"

Nobody invited him to sit down, but he grabbed a cushion and plopped himself down next to Kaitani. Fujiwara didn't say anything but knit his brows, an expression that clearly communicated that this man's presence was not welcome.

"It's been fifteen years since high school. You

seem to be doing well, but you never show up for the reunions. Everybody wants to know why."

"I am fairly busy at work. Good to see you in such high spirits."

His words notwithstanding, Fujiwara's countenance hardened. Sensing that Kaitani had been thrown for something of a loop by the sudden appearance of this interrupting man, he introduced him, saying, "Tagami is a classmate of mine from high school. This is Kaitani, one of my subordinates. We work on the same production team."

"Good to meet you," Tagami said, breathing alcohol-laden breath in Kaitani's face. He ordered a pitcher of beer from the waiter. "Hey, drink up," he said, filling Fujiwara's glass. "I work for Sedalis, an import agency. What do you do?"

Sedalis was one of the larger import agencies, and Kaitani was familiar with the name. They dealt with all kinds of merchandise, including foreign-made cosmetics. Not name-brand, but mainly low-price goods.

"I work in sales and marketing at a cosmetics company."

The Okinawan shrugged his shoulders and snorted a mocking laugh. Even an outsider could have sensed the scorn in his voice. "Cosmetics, huh? Sounds like something you'd be into. Sales is a surprise, though. Still, nice suit you're wearing, there. Versace, isn't it? You mean to tell me you make that much working sales for a cosmetics company?"

Fujiwara put down the beer mug and picked up

the sake glass. "As a single man, I have the resources to spend as I see fit. And stock options on top of that."

The man whistled through his teeth. "Look at the class-act you've turned into! Compared to the good old days, you've spiffed yourself up a bit. Must be real popular with the ladies, huh?"

Fujiwara sidestepped the question with an obvious show of humility.

"Sure you are. But—" The man lowered his voice to a whisper. "Missing one of your two little friends must cramp your style in bed, huh?"

He spoke softly, but Kaitani heard him clearly. Fujiwara suddenly reddened. He banged the glass down on the table.

The man flashed a devilish grin. "Take it easy, man. The truth's the truth. You haven't told Kaitani here about it, have you? See, when he was in grade school, he was taking a piss one day and a dog came by a chomped off one of his balls."

The shock of the revelation hit Kaitani in the solar plexus. He hadn't thought deeply about why Fujiwara was missing one of his testicles. He'd vaguely put it down to a genetic defect. That a dog had—

"Yeah, a Spitz, wasn't it?"

A Spitz. A small, white, fluffy dog. Kaitani's aunt once owned a Spitz. The dog was a noisy bitch, always yapping at him in its high-pitched bark.

"In high school, his nickname was Wonderdog. Get it? 'Cause the dog got one! Every summer when we had swimming for PE, his name would go up in lights. We'd throw a big coming-out party for him. He was like

the school idoru, see?"

The man cackled to himself. Listening to the one-sided conversation, Kaitani felt his temperature rising. Spouting off about somebody's past in the presence of total strangers—the jerk didn't have a drop of consideration in his body. He was no friend of Fujiwara's, Kaitani's surging temper told him.

"Kaitani." Not raising his head, Fujiwara got to his feet. "Seems I've had a bit too much to drink. I'm not feeling well. I'm going to have to beg off for the rest of the night."

"Eh?" said the man, raising his brows. "Hey, like I said, I ain't telling you nothin' but the truth. Don't go taking it out on the messenger. Seeing each other after such a long time, there's lots more to talk about."

"Please excuse me."

Fujiwara picked up his briefcase and strode out of the restaurant. Kaitani paid the bill and ran after him. The street was filled with traffic. Fujiwara stood at the side of the road and raised his right arm; a taxi was pulling up to the curb once Kaitani caught up with him. Without really thinking about what he was doing, he grabbed Fujiwara's arm.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't really understand himself, but he had the feeling he shouldn't let Fujiwara be alone. Unable to articulate a reason, he stammered, "I—um—"

"Let go of my arm."

Fujiwara tried to shake him off, but Kaitani held on and wouldn't let go. The taxi driver called out in an annoyed voice, "You want a ride or not?"

"Yes, I do."

Fujiwara twisted away from him, at the same time gurgling loudly. He clamped his hand over his mouth and did a one-eighty, his face green. He jerked free, ran over to the planter next to a nearby building, bent over and threw up. Kaitani hurried up to him and rubbed his back. At some point, the taxi took off.

Fujiwara took a while tossing his cookies. Even after he'd emptied his stomach, the dry heaves left him gasping. Kaitani bought a can of tea from a nearby vending machine. Fujiwara wordlessly took it and rinsed his mouth out. His stomach settled down after that. At the restaurant, he'd downed two pints of beer and two glasses of sake. Considering his intestinal fortitude, that wasn't nearly enough to make him loose it like this. Something had obviously put him off his game.

"Sorry for the trouble," he muttered, getting to his feet and tottering down the sidewalk.

"I'll go with you," said Kaitani, following behind him.

"I'm fine."

"So you say, but you don't look it."

"I'm telling you, I'm okay," Fujiwara shot back. And then immediately clamped his mouth shut, sprinted over to a tree planted along the roadway and retched. But he had nothing left to vomit.

Kaitani hailed a taxi. Taking Fujiwara by the shoulders, he helped him into the taxi. Fujiwara hunched over and collapsed in the back seat, so Kaitani offered his lap as a pillow. Fujiwara resisted at first, but perhaps finding it a more comfortable position, he eventually



began to relax.

When they arrived at the apartment building, Fujiwara told him, "Go home." Kaitani pretended not to hear. He stuck close to his side, propping Fujiwara up as he staggered along, his head bowed. He lacked the energy to push Kaitani away.

As soon as they stepped into the genkon, Fujiwara sank to his knees and curled up like a cat. In his normal state of mind, the fastidious Fujiwara wouldn't dream of plopping himself down in the genkon in his suit coat.

"Um—shouldn't you at least take off your shoes?"

"Leave me alone."

Kaitani had no intention of abandoning him dinner companion in this state. As Fujiwara showed no signs of rousing himself, Kaitani hauled him to his feet. When his feet failed to move on their own accord, Kaitani put his arms under his shoulders and dragged him into the living room and laid him on the sofa on his back. He removed his expensive shoes and placed them in the genkon. On the way back, he stopped in the kitchen and ran a glass of water.

"Drink this," he said.

Fujiwara took the glass of water; his fingers were trembling so badly that Kaitani steadied his grip with his own. Fujiwara drained the glass in one gulp and pressed it into Kaitani's hands. Then he slowly turned over, hunching his shoulders, and buried his face in his hands. His back shook with each breath. Kaitani couldn't see his face, but he knew he was crying.

The sight made his chest hurt so much he had to catch his breath. The weeping Fujiwara was an almost unbearably pitiful sight. Kaitani didn't know what to do next, or what he could do. Thoughts raced through his mind, but nothing concrete occurred to him. He simply stroked Fujiwara's back.

Kaitani's fingers had accustomed themselves to the contours of his quivering torso when Fujiwara raised his right arm. His eyes were red, and his cheeks were streaked with tears. "Sorry for causing such a scene. I'm fine. You can go."

"Yes, but—"

Left by himself, Fujiwara would go right on weeping, and Kaitani couldn't allow that. "You don't want me here?"

"I'll give you taxi fare. Just leave."

"That's not what I'm talking about. I—"

Annoyed by Kaitani's refusal to take a hint, Fujiwara suddenly grabbed the glass on the coffee table and threw the remaining water in Kaitani's face. The unexpected shock of the gesture, more than the drenching cold, froze him in place.

"I told you, I want to be alone! You enjoy seeing me like this? Were you in-cahoots with that man all along?"

Kaitani wiped his face with his sleeve; the words were like a dagger in his heart. Despite the fact that Fujiwara and the man at the restaurant had been classmates, watching him making fun of Fujiwara infuriated Kaitani. The man was a real bastard. But Kaitani was no different, having blackmailed Fujiwara

with those photographs. He'd hated Fujiwara, too, and had lowered himself to that man's level.

Such loathing was enough to turn Fujiwara into a sick drunk, to bring a grown man to tears, sobbing like a baby, and Kaitani hadn't even noticed. He knew what he'd done was bad, but he hadn't reflected on it. He'd excused his actions because Fujiwara was a jerk; that was the feeling in his gut...except that Fujiwara was no different than him. When cut, he bled. When wounded, he cried.

"Look, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I—" He had to get the dragon design for the containers approved, no matter what the cost, but even his apology amounted to nothing. "I really am sorry." Kaitani sank to his knees in front of Fujiwara and lowered his head. "I acted without thinking. It's all on me." He pressed his head to the damp floor until it hurt. "I never stopped to consider how much grief I was causing you."

The more he apologized, the more agitated he became. No matter what he said, it would come off as another lame excuse. Having done something so horrible, it'd be natural for Fujiwara to stay angry with him, to never forgive him. Nevertheless, Fujiwara had given him those pointers at work about the cost-cutting targets. He'd lent him his own computer when Kaitani's crashed. Although talking to him must have been a painful chore, when he considered that Fujiwara had been generous enough to maintain a working relationship no matter what he was feeling, tears welled up in his eyes.

"I was in elementary school at the time," Fujiwara said, and Kaitani raised his head with a start. "After the

dog bit off my testicle, my classmates started teasing me and calling me Wonderdog. By the time I started junior high, I hated going to school, and I thought about killing myself every day. I won acceptance to a high school that was quite far away. Finally, I thought, I'd be around people who didn't know what had happened to me. But my freshman year, during swimming class, Tagami found me out and things turned gruesome after that. If I was sent on some errand during swim class, they'd hide my underwear and trousers. I'd end up spending half of the day in the locker room. The more I upset I got, the more fun they thought it all was. Thanks to losing that testicle, my youth was far from dull gray. It was black."

Back in the tavern, when Fujiwara said that he didn't get along with other men, Kaitani concluded that he kept competitors at a distance out of arrogance and in order to ensure his popularity with women. However, after being teased so cruelly, no wonder he'd want to give a wide berth to other men his age.

"I only got my own life back again after I went to college. Nobody at college knew about my condition, and at first, I was treated like a normal person. I molded a lifestyle of my choosing and became the man I am today."

The fierce, almost ghastly look of intensity vanished from his face as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by one of weariness and resignation. "Go ahead and tell everybody about it, if that's what you wish to do. The photographs, too. Make me a laughing-stock. I'm used to it." Fujiwara averted his gaze and closed his eyes.

"I wouldn't do something like that. I swear."

There was no answer. With his eyes closed, Fujiwara's expression didn't change. He didn't believe him; he wasn't trustworthy. If he was in Fujiwara's shoes, he'd have no reason to trust himself, either. Even today, he hadn't been straight with him. He'd told Fujiwara to come with him or else, and then dragged him unwillingly to that tavern. Though he promised not to do again, his words simply were not convincing.

Kaitani stared at the dark spot of water on the floor. Merely thinking about how Fujiwara must be feeling made his chest ache. He wanted absolution. He wanted Fujiwara to forgive him. But he hadn't the slightest idea how to go about obtaining that forgiveness. He didn't know how to go about winning his much-needed trust.

After pondering and wracking his brain, Kaitani clenched his teeth in determination. He got to his feet, loosened his necktie and pulled it off. He steeled himself and continued with his plan of action. Prepared for the worst, Kaitani called out, "Section Chief Fujiwara. Open your eyes, please."

There was no response.

He asked again, and finally Fujiwara eyelids fluttered. He slowly opened his eyes. The moment he saw Kaitani, he awoke with a start. "Good God!" he shouted, scooting backwards on the couch. "W-What the hell is going on? What are you dangling that thing near my face for?"

Kaitani looked down at his "thing." Because of where he was standing and where Fujiwara had been

lying on the sofa, his "thing" had unintentionally come pretty close to Fujiwara's face. But that was the least of his concerns. "This is what I've resolved to do." Stark naked, Kaitani threw out his chest.

"You've got to be kidding me," Fujiwara practically screamed. His shoulders shook and the vein throbbed on his forehead. "What are you trying to do, show off your complete set?"

"No, not that! I was just thinking that you could take some compromising pictures of me—"

"Why the hell should I want to take nude photographs of you?"

Far from communicating the intent of his do-or-die resolve, Kaitani was simply making Fujiwara mad. The frustration was enough to bring him to tears. "So you can take the picture and then send it to everybody in the company."

"If I did that, my character would be called into question."

"You could send it from an Internet café. Then nobody would know who sent it."

Fujiwara whacked the headrest of the sofa with the palm of his hand. "That's beside the point! What's so damned important about my sending everybody at the company nude photographs of you?"

His fury hit Kaitani like a sharp jab to the head, gradually beating him down. "I've really been thinking about what I did. If what I did to you was done to me and I felt as horribly embarrassed as you, I thought maybe you'd forgive me for the way I've acted up till now."

Fujiwara said nothing, but sat there with a

disgusted look on his face.

"Um—I'll do whatever you say. You want to tie me up like in a porn shot, fine. Spread my legs apart, okay. Whatever you want, just say it."

He'd resolved himself and resigned himself. He waited, but no directions came. Fujiwara turned his face away. He wouldn't even look at him. After an interminable silence, Kaitani heard a long, deep sigh.

"Get dressed."

"Yes, but—"

"I said, put your clothes on. At least your underwear."

His tone of voice was no longer suffused with anger. He was back to the good old stern Fujiwara. In his newly cool and collected presence, Kaitani suddenly became self-conscious of his state of undress and quickly pulled on his undershorts.

"Now, sit down."

As instructed, Kaitani dutifully knelt down on the floor in front of the sofa, Japanese-style. The eyes of the man facing him were still red, but his cheeks were dry. This was the face of the Fujiwara he was accustomed to.

"You possess the thought processes of a child."

"When you say, a child—"

"A combination of simplemindedness and stupidity I find rather refreshing."

Kaitani didn't know whether to take this as praise or censure. Yet Fujiwara more-or-less seemed to be in a good mood.

"So . . . you forgive me for everything?" Kaitani

asked with an upturned gaze.

Fujiwara's eyes narrowed. "After this, it all depends on your attitude."

"You can count on me. I'll take my job seriously. I'll do everything you tell me to do, and always keep myself well-groomed."

"So you say. But what you're saying now is what's expected of any member of society. At this juncture, it should be second-nature to you."

Relentlessly he critiqued Kaitani, and Kaitani could do nothing but bow his head and agree. When Fujiwara finally paused to take a breath, he again stretched out on the sofa, face-up. He pressed his right hand to his forehead.

"I'm tired. It's time for you to go home."

"Yes," Kaitani replied, picking up the clothing at his feet.

He was putting on his shirt when he heard Fujiwara say to himself, "Fifteen years . . . even after fifteen years, I haven't been able to change the past—"

Fujiwara spoke to himself in a small voice. That man at the restaurant—he hadn't answered him back. No, he hadn't said a thing in his defense. When Kaitani thought about what must have been going through his mind, he found the feelings almost unbearable.

He clenched his right hand. "You're incredible, Section Chief."

The Section Chief turned his head slightly toward him.

"Becoming section chief at your age, not a single one of your product launches ever failing to sell

successfully. That's what everybody says. You're good at your job, your suits are always top-of-the-line and you're a wine connoisseur. You've got a great-looking face, tremendous style, and women love you. In fact, a girl I liked was crazy about you instead. What it comes down to is...you're an incredible person."

Fujiwara looked away awkwardly. "You needn't go out of your way to flatter me."

"I'm not going out of my way. You certainly come across as a hard man, but I think you're really quite kind. That's why you shouldn't worry about anything that dumb redneck said. No matter how you look at it, guys like that are way worse-off than you'll ever be. Besides, he was short and had smelly feet. You shouldn't pay any attention to the bigoted opinions of a dirtbag like him."

"Bigoted opinions," Fujiwara repeated to himself.

"He was just jealous of you because you're so handsome. That's why he dredged up the past and was giving you a hard time about it. Not only that, but listening to him reminded me that in high school, guys who tease other kids are the ones with the problems, you know? A bunch of lowlifes who have to tear other people down to feel good about themselves...that's just the way they are. Talking about somebody's privates in front of a subordinate like that? I don't care who you are, but that's the kind of thing you keep to yourself, right?"

As he spoke, Kaitani felt himself getting all riled up again. "Man, that guy pisses me off. Just once, I'd like to bash him one in his big, sweaty face." Thinking

about the disgusting man, reeking of alcohol, Kaitani delivered two quick jabs into the air. "No matter how old he gets, he's nothing but a cowardly jerk who takes advantage of other people's weaknesses."

"Enough already," a faint voice told him. "You needn't try so hard to make me feel better. I know myself better than any man."

"I'm not saying anything that isn't true. That guy's just a chickenshit little redneck. The Section Chief is a man among men."

The Section Chief's bloodshot eyes fastened on his. Kaitani added, "That's why, the next time you meet him, you knock him on his ass. 'Think you can play me for the fool? Think again, fool.' That's what you tell him. He'd piss his pants. Guaranteed, he'd never call you out you like that again."

Fujiwara sighed and smiled. He rubbed his eyes and chuckled. "How strange. Still going on about beating him up."

Kaitani leaned forward. "Let's go get him now! We'll turn him into a punching bag and then drag him down the main street naked. He's got it coming to him in spades."

Fujiwara slowly rose from the couch. "Sure. The next time we meet him, that's exactly what we'll do. But not today. I need to rest."

He stumbled forward as he spoke. He flailed about with his hands, and with a thud he came to rest in Kaitani's arms. His sweet scent, along with the sensation of his body in his arms, gave Kaitani a start.

"Sorry 'bout that."

Fujiwara attempted to stand on his own two feet, but couldn't seem to find a firm footing. He swayed with every step, and had to hold on tightly to Kaitani's arm.

"Are you okay?" Kaitani said, raising his voice. Being in such close proximity made him nervous.

"I think," Fujiwara answered in a small voice, but he'd didn't sound okay.

Kaitani gritted his back teeth, steadied himself, and picked Fujiwara up in his arms.

"K-Kaitani—" Fujiwara kicked his feet back and forth.

No matter how strong or determined Kaitani was, Fujiwara was not a small man. With all the thrashing about, his arms were going numb from the pressure. "You'll have to stop moving so much, please. I'm afraid I'll drop you."

Fujiwara calmed his limbs. As Kaitani carried him to the bedroom, Fujiwara slumped in his arms, his chin resting on his chest. After Kaitani placed him on the bed, he took off his suit and placed it on the bedside table, and then crawled under the sheets. He said, with his voice muffled by the sheets, "It feels strange thanking you, but you've been a real help to me today."

Watching the swells and undulations in the sheets formed by Fujiwara's body, Kaitani thought to himself, I don't want to go home. He wanted to stay here, by Fujiwara's side. The floor would be fine, as long as they could be in the same room together.

Kaitani sat down on the floor with his back against the side of the bed. "I'm going to stay here tonight, if that's okay with you."

Fujiwara didn't reply.

"It's late, and it'd be a hassle. I'll just make myself comfortable here. Sorry about this."

Sitting on the floor, clad in only his shirt, Kaitani hugged his knees to his chest. He only wished to be by Fujiwara's side; that was his sole desire. Yet, the feeling of being abandoned in the silence was a painful one.

"The next time I see that redneck," Kaitani whispered to himself, "I'm going to give him a pounding he'll never forget. I'll tear him a new one."

Resting his chin on his knees and staring at the patterns on the wallpaper, he heard his name being called. When he glanced back over his shoulder, Fujiwara had propped himself up on his elbows and was looking at him. "Want to share the bed?"

Kaitani's heart thumped and his blood raced in his veins. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"It's a bit small for two men, but it's a queen-sized mattress, and sleeping up here has got to be better than the floor. There's also the living room sofa—"

"Excuse me," Kaitani said, leaping to his feet. Fujiwara slid over to the right side of the bed. Slipping between the still warm sheets where Fujiwara had been resting until a minute ago, his sweet scent wafted up and his heart wouldn't rest. While sleeping next to him was wonderful, with his heart pounding and his eyes ablaze, there was no way he was going to get any rest. He gulped unnaturally, and swallowed hard.

"The next time we meet Tagami—" Hearing Fujiwara's voice, Kaitani turned over, but Fujiwara had his back to him and he couldn't see his face. Fujiwara

said, "You beat him up for me, okay?"

"That's totally okay. I'm with you all the way."

A short while later, Fujiwara's breathing became calmer and more even. Kaitani peered at his face, which appeared to be almost floating in the glow of the ceiling light. His unguarded countenance, his half-open lips and long eyelashes... Aroused by such beauty and adorableness, he checked his growing excitement. Kaitani hunched his shoulders and settled himself along the edge of the bed.

Chapter 5

Kaitani sensed that somebody was calling his name, a voice singing from far away. Convinced that it couldn't have anything to do with him, he went on slumbering in that warm, soft, comfortable place.

That was why he couldn't imagine anything as unpleasant as being so roughly shaken back and forth. Shaking off his antagonist, he crawled back to that soft place.

"Get up already! You'll be late for work!"

A familiar, angry voice roused the still half-asleep Kaitani. "S-Sorry!" His brain, acting on a previous incident that associated Fujiwara's temper with dozing-off at work, automatically began to apologize. As he did, from within a halo of dazzling light he heard someone softly laughing. Who was that standing in the morning sun? Why was he sleeping in this bed clothed only in his shirt? The memories of the night before slowly trickled back into his consciousness.

"Sorry about raising my voice. You were dead to the world, even after calling to you and shaking you."

"No problem," he said, combing down the hair on the back of his head.

"I understand now why you're late so often."

Fujiwara had on a crisp, blue shirt, a boldly striped necktie, and navy-blue slacks. Even his hair was perfectly coiffed. No matter what light you

considered him in, he was the picture of ready-to-go, elite businessman. Not a hint remained of the previous night's bouts of tears and vomiting.

"There's still a little time before we have to leave for work. Take a shower. I pressed your slacks and jacket. Some of my shirts are on the big side, so I'll lend you one."

"Thank you," said Kaitani, bowing his head.

Considering what had happened the previous night, Fujiwara's countenance was surprisingly calm, and there was a gentle look in his eyes. When Kaitani gazed absent-mindedly back at him, Fujiwara clapped his hands together. "C'mon! Up and at 'em!"

With that kick in the ass, Kaitani jumped down from the bed. He went to the bathroom and took a shower. "I left a change of clothes on the vanity," Fujiwara's voice called out.

The shirt was a tad small, but wearable. The slacks he'd shed in the living room were so cleanly pressed that they looked as if they'd just come back from the dry cleaner.

He finished getting dressed and went back to the living room. His eyes met those of Fujiwara, who was at the counter island between the living room and kitchen. He beckoned Kaitani over, and when he approached, said, "Here you go," and presented him with a coffee cup.

Unlike the instant coffee at work, or the canned coffee he occasionally bought, the aroma itself was different. The first swallow startled him further. The coffee was surprisingly good.

"This coffee tastes amazing!" he muttered.

Fujiwara grinned. "That's espresso. I just can't start the day without one of these."

Kaitani tilted his head to the side. He had the feeling he'd heard that line somewhere before. Then he remembered. At a company party, Fujiwara had said the same thing to a girl sitting next to him. Every companion Fujiwara brought to his apartment no doubt got the same treatment. When Kaitani thought about all the girls who must have stood here sipping their espressos, he suddenly felt very depressed.

"Looks like you're wearing the shirt I laid out for you."

"Yeah, it fits okay. Thanks."

"You've got a pretty good physique, so I wasn't sure. Happy to know it works. You wouldn't want to wear the same shirt you were wearing yesterday."

In fact, Kaitani often wore the same shirt for two or three days. It was a secret he'd keep to himself, especially in front of a beautiful guy he liked as much as Fujiwara. Nevertheless, a man as fastidious about appearances as Fujiwara was bound to have noticed it already.

"Last night, I got myself pretty drunk and caused you a lot of problems. I must apologize for my behavior." Fujiwara placed his empty coffee cup on the table.

"No, it was nothing at all. I'm sorry as well for what I did."

Their eyes met and Fujiwara smiled. This wasn't his typical, unruffled demeanor. It was a natural smile,

revealing that missing, natural part of him. Kaitani's heart leapt into his mouth. Today, for some reason, Fujiwara radiated a kind and easy-going aura.

"Ah, yes," Fujiwara said to himself. "That's reminds me." He left and returned to the living room with a tie that sported a polka-dot pattern. "You always wear solid-colored ties, but I have to think that a striped or polka-dot tie would go better with a navy suit and a pastel shirt, particularly something like this silver motif."

Fujiwara smoothly and without a hitch fastened the tie around Kaitani's neck. "Like I thought, it's a perfect match. You'll see when you look in the mirror."

Kaitani happily examined the tie. Its texture and luster was quite different from the ones he had at home. The tie exuded a high-class feel.

"What, don't you like this design?"

Stroking the tie with his fingertips, Kaitani had started feeling a bit anxious. "No, that's not it. I guess I'm a little worried that I'm going get it all messed up. It looks pretty expensive. You know I don't have the best manners."

Fujiwara smiled, narrowing his eyes. "Consider it a gift. That's a design I don't really have much occasion to use."

"T-That's okay. I'll return it after I get it cleaned."

"I'm not going to use it anyway, so don't worry about it. Clothes are something of a hobby of mine. I must have at least two hundred ties. No insult intended, but I suspect you buy your ties at wholesale outlet

stores."

Kaitani started a bit. At one of the bigger men's wear apparel stores, he could get three ties for 1500 yen during a truckload sale. Fujiwara had him there.

"Even if you can't tell by just looking at them, the real thing is different. It goes without saying that the substance inside often counts more than appearances. But paying attention to what you can see can help you refine what you can't. Maybe it's about time about time you started wearing an article or two of the real thing."

"I-I suppose you're right. I haven't really been interested in such things up until now. I'll give it my best shot."

Fujiwara suddenly drew very close. Kaitani swallowed hard. Fujiwara said, "The way you've been playing with your tie, now I think the tie is too tight."

His slender, white fingertips stroked at his chest, his beautiful face so close, his long eyelashes, a mouth that made his senses spin—

"There you go."

A smile floated to Fujiwara's lips. He tapped on Kaitani's chest, raised his head and blinked two, three times. Tilting his head to the side, he said, "What's with the red face? Are you feeling all right?"

Kaitani certainly couldn't say that he was blushing from self-consciousness because he was madly in love with Fujiwara. Without speaking, he slowly bowed his head.

Chapter 6

It was the middle of September. The hot daytime sun gleamed as brightly as ever, but gradually, the clouds were lifting and the humidity falling. A typhoon was building in the East China Sea. The weather forecasts warned repeatedly that it might hit the main island head-on.

Kaitani sat in the odd little tavern called Kemuri, his elbows on the table and his head in his hands.

Higashiyama sat across from him, leaning back in his chair. He folded his arms and knit his brows. "Okay, I get that you're really upset about something. So, why don't you spell it out for me? I can't give you any advice otherwise."

The table was a good ways from the bar, and it seemed the proprietress had forgotten about their existence. If they wanted to order anything, somebody was going to have to get up and go to the bar. Regular customers aware of this idiosyncrasy made sure not to sit at the outlying archipelago of tables. But today they'd risked it, and sat where they couldn't be easily overheard.

"You're doing well enough at work, so this must have something to do with Section Chief Fujiwara."

Not raising his eyes, Kaitani nodded. Things were going well enough that the previous conflicts and ups and downs of his job were like a dream to him

now. The other day, they'd held auditions for the first of the KASHA commercials. As KASHA was a new brand, they were asking for a lot: a spokesman with a spotless reputation, yet projecting a touch of the classic bon vivant, who was also a little on the wild side. Kaitani was sure it'd prove a tough role to fill, yet they unanimously agreed on a new, college-aged actor. Even though he said that in the future he hoped to become a movie actor, the kid struck him as a centered person. More than simply an attractive face, his looks were unique as well. He was also chosen for the print ad campaign.

Even before completing the market research preceding the product rollout, the brand's popularity was growing. All they had to do was wait for its debut next spring.

"Things aren't going well with Section Chief Fujiwara?"

Kaitani shook his head back and forth. "Far from it; they're going extraordinarily well."

Dumbfounded, Higashiyami shrugged his shoulders. "If that's the case, then what's the problem?"

"That is the problem." Kaitani raised his head. "Recently, the Section Chief has been incredibly nice to me. He takes me to dinner two or three times a week. 'I feel like a drink,' he's always telling me. 'Why don't you come along?' Having him pay all the time seems wrong, but whenever I offer to pick up the tab, he whips out his credit card and takes care of it. 'Just spending the dividends on my stock,' he says, and refuses to let me pay for anything."

"I see," Higashiyama said knowingly. "Yeah,

there are guys who make a practice of treating everybody. It's a way of showing off their status. Rather than getting all stubborn about it and insisting on paying your own way, why not just tip your hat and go with the flow? If that doesn't sit well with you, then you'll just have to turn down his invitations."

"But I like eating dinner with him. It's fun. And that's not my only concern. He gives me expensive-looking neckties and all kinds of other stuff that he says he doesn't use."

"Well, if he says he's giving them to you because he doesn't need them anymore, then what's the problem with taking them? If it bothers you, then tell him it bothers you."

Kaitani shook his head. "I never had much in the way of neckties and belts, so when I say I'm thankful, I really am, but—"

Higashiyama furrowed his brows and looked at Kaitani with upturned eyes. "Is that what you're really concerned about?"

"I am. Really. Work is pretty tough, and recently he's been handing me some pretty difficult jobs. Frankly, I'm getting a little punch-drunk from the constant workout, but he smiles at me and says it's because he trusts me. It'd look bad to say I can't, so what choice do I have? All I can do is hit the books, you know?"

"Wait a minute," Higashiyama started to say. "From what I've heard so far, the relationship you two have sounds like the ideal—"

"That's why. Even though we've built a trusting relationship, love doesn't seem to be growing."

Higashiyama folded his arms and inclined his head. At once he leaned over the table and spoke in a hushed voice. "Tomoharu tells me that at the dance party at Belzard, you and Section Chief Fujiwara slept together."

"We did. But thanks to the alcohol and aphrodisiacs, he doesn't remember a thing."

"He doesn't remember having sex?" Higashiyama whispered.

"Well, yeah, but he was suffering because of those aphrodisiacs, and to get him off I worked on him with my fingers. At least, that's what I told him. He's scary when he's mad."

"Yeah, but there's a big difference between your fingers and your other appendage." Higashiyama sighed to himself. He looked at Kaitani and then somewhat awkwardly looked away. "What is it, Higashiyamasan?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Hey, you got something to say, say it. Don't hold back on my account."

Higashiyama hemmed and hawed for a minute. "Um, well, size-wise, your equipment—"

Kaitani at once knew what he was talking about, and blushed simultaneously. "Hey, my equipment is standard issue. And no matter how you measure it, it's not the size of my finger."

"To be sure," Higashiyama said, sweat breaking out on his forehead. He picked up the glass of water in front of him and gulped it down. "The only reason he bought it was because I don't think he's done anything

like that before."

Higashiyama choked drinking his water and launched in a coughing fit. "Never done it before?"

"The Section Chief would rather sleep with women."

Higashiyama blinked in apparent surprise and lowered his voice noticeably. "You're telling me he likes bondage play and he treats you like his pet dog, and he's straight?"

Kaitani hadn't confessed to the real reason behind that "bondage play." He was left to beat around the bush. "Well, ah, yes. The thing is...it's not going to happen now. To put things simply, we're talking about a superior-subordinate relationship. Like I told you, having his trust is great, and otherwise we're on top of the world, but as for myself—"

"You want to take this relationship to the next level, eh?"

Kaitani wrapped his arms around his head. "To but it bluntly, I'm scared of ruining the good thing we've got going. Up till now, he's never put his faith in me, or treated me so well."

The "man of ennui," the "man of cool," the stubborn bastard that was his boss. He'd never have believed that Fujiwara would change into such a nice, considerate guy once he put his trust in him. Or rather, he'd always believed it was the kind of thing that always happened to somebody else.

Higashiyama fell into silence, a puzzled look on his face. Kaitani took a long breath and waited for his reply. He was happy being trusted and treated well

by somebody he liked. Being closer to each other than they were before was a great feeling, too. But just being next to him and nothing else was equally painful; he couldn't help wanting to be much more intimate. During the day when they worked together, and in the evenings when they dined together—while spending most of their days together—he could barely stand the hours between parting at the station and falling asleep. Watching the back of the perfectly-kempt Fujiwara as he walked away, Kaitani repeated to himself over and over: Please take me home with you.

Unable to do anything other than meekly look at his face whenever they met, Kaitani experienced the pains of unrequited love in a way he never had before. Although he'd loved before, and had desperately longed to see his lover before, he'd never suffered like this. The weekends that he had once looked forward to, he now hated. For two whole days, he couldn't see Fujiwara's face, wouldn't hear his voice.

Most of all, he loved the times Fujiwara let his guard down, showing to him a face as beautiful as fresh flowers blooming. He wished to make Fujiwara his and his alone. He would have him all to himself, take him home and embrace him, and as more than mere superior and subordinate, they would rise to the level of lovers. But telling Fujiwara he loved him was an intimidating step. Kaitani knew he couldn't bear being rebuffed and ignored.

Every time he glanced at Fujiwara's flawless profile, he found it hard to believe that he had in fact once greedily devoured that beautiful body.

"What if—" The taciturn Higashiyama finally opened his mouth. "What if, in the meantime, you found somebody to, you know, quench the thirst? There're a few people I could introduce you to—"

The proposal gave Kaitani a shock. He couldn't have imagined his trusted friend making such a crude proposition. "That's the not the problem. What I'm looking for is some serious advice about affairs of the heart." He banged his fists down on the table.

In contrast to the clearly upset Kaitani, Higashiyama looked back at him with a composed expression. "But—"

"I'm serious."

Higashiyama sighed. "Yeah, and that's the problem right there. The object of your affection is your boss. Even if his proclivities are a bit on the odd side, he's straight and is hardly lacking for attention from the opposite sex. Not to mention that he has his pick of the litter. In light of all that, how likely do you think it is that he'll yield to an admission of love from you?"

The question went right to the heart of the matter. Kaitani could offer no reply.

"When the Section Chief was practicing his 'hobby' with you, he probably didn't want to get into a relationship like that, don't you think? I happen to think the two of you simply maintaining a decent relationship now is pretty amazing. I guess that's why hauling around a lot of emotional baggage that will never amount to much strikes me as a wasted effort."

Higashiyama entwined his fingers and rested his hands on the table. "If you and Fujiwara were of a

similar mind, I'd advise you to go ahead and tell him you loved him. However, if he's straight, then I'd say no. I think it's well-nigh impossible that things will go well. Quite the opposite, actually...they may get much worse."

Kaitani hung his head. Dealing so closely with Fujiwara, he knew better than anybody the impossibility of his desires. On the other hand, even if he was headed for a certain but honorable defeat, he would have appreciated some encouragement. Something like: So, that's the way things are, huh? You've got yourself a hard row to hoe, but keep at it! I'm behind you all the way!

He wanted a boost that would move things forward and bring him closer to professing his love. Instead, Higashiyama was holding him back, forcing him to confront reality instead of averting his eyes. It only made him feel depressed.

"I'm only saying this because it's you, but my partner, Imakura, was straight as well."

Kaitani's head popped up.

"Our case is special. We ended up alone, by ourselves. After a month and then two months living together, he fell in love with me. At the time, I lied to him and told him I was still a virgin, and used that deception to make him mine. However, the moment we got back to civilization, he took off. It was quite a shock, and it took me a while to get back on my feet again.

"B-But you're getting on so well—"

Higashiyama shrugged. "The fact that we're doing well is the result of many lucky accidents. Your

situation is quite different from mine. You can't both mutually and openly express your love for each other, so your feelings remain unrequited."

Kaitani lowered his gaze.

"True, people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, but I don't want to give you advice I can't stand behind. You're asking for one high-maintenance relationship, making the Section Chief your partner. It's going to wear you out."

Kaitani couldn't think of how to respond. He could neither say "I give up!" or "Once more into the breach!" Still in a dark mood, he and Higashiyama left the tavern and parted ways. Kaitani trudged to the station. It'd been quite hot that day, but the night breeze was crisp and chilly. His loneliness cut through the crevices in his soul.

Even if he said he was going to give up, there was no way he could give up now. Fujiwara was a nice guy, and when he was kind and attentive, it made him happy. He wanted something more than all of this, but just wanting something didn't make it his. Even if he said he loved Fujiwara, was there even a one-percent change of anything coming of it?

He'd started this race and he wanted to finish it. If this was a purely physical challenge, like doing a thousand pushups, or twenty-thousand practice swings with a kendo sword, then he'd be right on it. But this was a different kind of hurdle to overcome. He didn't want to give up; no way was he throwing in the towel. Yet he didn't have the slightest idea of what to do next.

He hated the thought of going home in his

present state. His feet brought him to the commercial district at the edge of town, to the threshold of a black door. He stared at the sign over the door: "Belzard S." He'd never been in by himself. He sucked up his courage and opened the door.

"Goodness gracious, but isn't that Kaitani-chan? Long time, no see."

Tomoharu sashayed over to meet him. He was wearing a sheer fishnet jersey that revealed his nipples and navel. Kaitani had gotten over the visual shock of meeting this bearded lady, and a part of him simply accepted Tomoharu's outrageous appearance as no big deal.

As soon as Kaitani sat down at the bar, he placed his elbows on the counter top and sighed.

"You're not a happy camper," Tomoharu pressed, drawing nearer. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kaitani dissembled at first. "You know, work and all—"

"Oh, have a drink and kiss your troubles goodbye," Tomoharu said, pouring him a cocktail, and then topping it off two more times.

That was when Kaitani fessed up. He told Tomoharu things he hadn't told Higashiyama. He told him how he'd used the photographs he'd taken of Fujiwara's missing testicle to blackmail him into approving his proposals. He told him the truth behind his "bondage play" with Fujiwara, and about how he'd panicked when Tomoharu came onto him so strong and how he'd made Fujiwara pretend to be his lover. How Fujiwara had tried to mount him, and how he'd turned

the tables on him. About the incident in the tavern and about how their "ideal" relationship was causing him so much anguish. He told the whole nine yards, the whole ball of wax.

When he got to the part about discussing his relationship with Fujiwara with Higashiyama, he got so down he almost felt like crying. "My thoughts get so muddled whenever we're together. Even when I'm carrying on a normal conversation, there's a part of me that can't stop thinking about sex. I mean, it feels so disgusting."

Other side of the counter, having put everything else and hold to give him his undivided attention, Tomoharu leaned across the counter. "What in the world is the big deal?" he demanded to know. "This is nothing to get so worked up about! When there's somebody you really like, what normal guy isn't going get horny and start fantasizing, any time of the day or night? Myself, when a customer walks in the place, even before looking at his face, I check out his package. I imagine size and shape, and what it'll be like when he's excited. Boy, can I get hot under the collar!"

Within Kaitani's aching heart, the thought came to him: That's not really the same thing I'm talking about. But he kept this thought to himself. "Higashiyama said that telling Fujiwara I loved him probably wasn't a good idea. That's why I don't really know what to do next."

"What a ridiculous thing to say! If you love someone, then you go after him!" Accompanying his words was an equally strong thump on the shoulders.

Surprised, Kaitani raised his head. Tomoharu said, "When it comes to human existence, passion is the life of the party. And nothing cools off the party faster than letting these little moral dilemmas get the better of you. Falling in love with somebody is a miracle. When you feel that blood rushing through your veins, your only recourse is to charge forward. I don't care if you're homo, hetero, or bi—none of that matters in the least!"

Though these were the spirited words he'd been waiting and wishing for, uncertainty still tinged his thoughts. "But what if I tell him, and the relationship goes south after that?"

Tomoharu straightened his back and drew in his chin. "That's life, my friend. Better to have loved and lost, then never to have loved at all. No matter whom I'm hooking up with, if I fall for him, I'm going to tell him. I don't care if he's the President. If I tell him and the shit hits the fan, well, then I write him off as a small-minded bastard and put him out of my mind."

Listening to Tomoharu's lecture, Kaitani's overcast spirits began to lift. Tomoharu was right. Rather than biting his tongue and biding his time, better to speak up and taste the regret and rejection now. If the relationship went south, then south it would go. It was time to stop thinking about tomorrow. Who knew what was going to happen then?

"Exactly. I don't need to be embarrassed about my feelings. Best to cut right to the chase and tell him I love him."

"That's the spirit! Go for it!" said Tomoharu, holding up his clenched right hand. "Go forth with

courage! And if it all comes crashing down around your ears, I'll be there to pick up the pieces. Yuichi is too conservative. Once he got his hands on a sweet thing like Takashi-chan, he turned all prim and proper. Until then, he consented to every come-on, and clung to nobody's apron strings. He was a real player, a completely different person."

Kaitani didn't recognize the Higashiyama that Tomoharu was describing. When he pointed this out, Tomoharu planted his hands on his waist and insisted it was so. "He'd come here and always leave with the cutest guy in the room. He took everybody aback."

This was a side of Higashiyama—the rational, kind, big-brother type who always looked out for him—that he'd never imagined.

"You pay no mind to what Yuichi is saying, Kaitani-chan. It's time for you put the pedal to the metal and lay the hammer down!"

He slapped something down on the counter top in front of him. Kaitani thought it was a piece of paper, but it turned out to be a pile of condoms. Kaitani hastily covered the five rubbers with his hands. "W-What's this for?!"

"These are for you," Tomohara said with a wink. "The brand is Like a Virgin. The pharmaceutical company Yuichi was working at before makes them. When the company went bankrupt, they unloaded a lot of inventory at fire sale prices. They're really thin but strong, and the sensation is the best. Think of them as your good luck charms."

After finishing off one more stiff drink, Kaitani

got to his feet. He hated being plagued by all this indecisiveness. Right now, he was going to confront Fujiwara and tell him how he felt. After pledging to Tomoharu that this was exactly what he would do, he bid him goodbye and set off for ground zero.

He was waiting at the side of the road for a taxi when Tomoharu caught up with him. "Forewarned is forearmed," he said, and slipped a small bottle of K-Y Jelly into his pocket. "A man keeps his word!"

"Yes!"

With Tomoharu's reassurances pushing him like a strong tailwind, Kaitani drew additional strength from his intoxicated state and headed for Fujiwara's apartment building, toying with the "lucky" Like a Virgin condoms in the pocket of his business suit. It was unlikely that the opportunity to use them would present itself, but in any event, he would tell Fujiwara he loved him. He'd vowed to speak his true feelings, but the closer he came to where Fujiwara lived, the more his resolve began to waver.

It was eleven-thirty at night when he finally arrived at the apartment building, but after coming so far, the weight Higashiyama's words pressed down on his heart. If he professed his love and Fujiwara rejected him, he'd still have to show his face at work every day. A few hours earlier he'd "seized the day," believing that he would only worry about crossing those bridges when he came to them. However, what came next obviously did matter, and he did have to think about it now. He could try to ignore it and avoid it, but the hard fact of the matter was that he had to work with Fujiwara.

Kaitani paced back and forth in front of Fujiwara's building. Just saying he loved Fujiwara would be easy. He'd pressed the call button and said that he had something he had to talk to Fujiwara about, and then tell him. Even if he did communicate his true feelings, when he thought about how much he could lose with so simple a gesture, his courage fled him. The boost of encouragement from Tomoharu that had propelled him this far gradually faded away.

"Kaitani?"

Behind him, somebody called out his name. His heart nearly flew out of his chest in surprise. He tremulously turned around. Standing there, no mistake about it, was Fujiwara himself.

"I thought I recognized you, but I couldn't be sure. What are you doing here at this hour?"

The shock hit him like an unexpected punch in the stomach, and he stumbled backward. Standing next to Fujiwara was a pretty woman even younger than Kaitani, clinging to his arm. He'd seen her face before, so she must be a Cavi employee, but her name escaped him. She was probably from a different division.

Asking the girl to wait, Fujiwara approached him. Kaitani instinctively bowed his head. They worked together and had dinner together two or three times a week, and because they were always together, it had never occurred to him that Fujiwara might be seeing a woman on the side. After splitting up with Sasaguri-san, Kaitani hadn't heard any more rumors about Fujiwara's dalliances.

"Did you need to see me about something?"

"Um . . . no . . . I . . ." Kaitani mumbled. "I happened to be in the neighborhood, so I . . ."

If he left right now, Fujiwara would no doubt take that girl up to his apartment and have sex with her. His fingertips tingled with rage. He tightly clenched both fists. That alone he would not abide. No way, no-how. He couldn't allow anybody else to touch his beloved Fujiwara.

"There's something I really need to talk with you about."

"Just a minute," Fujiwara said under his breath, and went back to the girl. They spoke together, and then Fujiwara approached the curb and flagged a taxi. He helped her in and sent her on her way.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Fujiwara said, returning alone.

Kaitani was overjoyed at the priority he'd obviously been given. Still, that woman was Fujiwara's girlfriend, occupying the position he desired for himself.

"If you wished to speak with me, emailing or phoning me ahead of time would have helped to expedite things, rather than coming directly to my home."

"I'm sorry."

A burst of rain suddenly interrupted their conversation. They walked quickly to the lobby of the apartment building, went through the security door, and got on the elevator. Inside the apartment, Fujiwara got Kaitani a towel and directed him to the sofa in the living room.

As he had come to expect of Fujiwara, not even

a speck of dust sullied the perfectly-kept room. Kaitani dried himself off, scattering drops of rainwater on the gray carpet.

"A sommelier I know introduced me to a great German wine, so I decided to check it out myself." Fujiwara came back into the living room, two wine glasses in his right hand and a bottle of wine in his left. He'd removed his suit coat and tie, and undid the top button of his shirt. He had a relaxed air about him. He removed the cork from the bottle, filled the glasses and handed one to Kaitani.

"I know you prefer a milder white wine. Go ahead, have a taste."

"I'm impressed you remembered. I believe I only mentioned it in passing."

Fujiwara's eyes narrowed and his mouth turned up in a smile. It was such a sexy smile that it made Kaitani gulp in response. Blindsided by a carnal cannonade, a firestorm broke out between thighs. But he somehow managed to bring his passions under control with a fire extinguisher of cold logic.

Fujiwara uncrossed and crossed his long legs, slightly jiggling the wine glass in his left hand. "Remembering people's predilections is a hobby of mine. It is easy to carry on a conversation when you do, and you can catch the joy in others' faces at unexpected moments."

To be honest, Kaitani couldn't taste the wine at all. His attention was too focused on Fujiwara—the way his cheeks moved as he drew the wine into his mouth and slowly tasted it—the way his throat quivered when

he swallowed. It was not his intention, but so lascivious were these gestures that Kaitani couldn't help but consider seduction.

"I was less that partial to the taste of white wine, but knowing that you liked it, I've developed something of a fondness for it as well. Though white wine doesn't possess the ardor and body of red, it has an ingenuous character that I appreciate."

In his typically refined manner, Fujiwara gently placed the wine glass on the coffee table. "Be that what it may, what did you wish to speak with me about?"

It was difficult for Kaitani to respond readily to such a gentlemanly inquiry, especially after seeing him with a girl such a short time ago. Kaitani glanced up at the man in front of him. What were the odds that when he told Fujiwara he loved him, Fujiwara was going to respond similarly? Kaitani couldn't deny the feeling that the girl had erased the remaining one percent

Kaitani didn't want Fujiwara sleeping with that girl. He'd said he wanted to talk. But his mind went blank. He held his head in his hands.

"What is distressing you so?"

Fujiwara spoke in a kindly tone of voice. Yet no words issued forth. Then, in the midst of the darkness, Tomoharu's words rose in Kaitani's head like the morning sun. Once Yuichi got his hands on a sweet thing like Takashi-chan, he turned all prim and proper. Until then, he consented to every come-on, and clung to nobody's apron strings. He was a real player. . .

Even the austere Higashiyama, until he met Imakura, had been that kind of person. And when it

came to romance, Fujiwara may well be a "player," too. Speaking of which, he had spoken before of enjoying many affairs with many women. If his relationship with that girl was equally shallow, that meant he still had a chance.

"That woman you were with before, are the two of you dating?"

Fujiwara looked back at him suspiciously. "So now this conversation is not about you, but me?"

"No, I mean, for the time being, there's something I would like to get your opinion about."

As Kaitani prevaricated, Fujiwara tilted his head to the side. He again picked up the wind glass. "We just began dating the last week. Today is the first time we've eaten out together."

"So, you began after you told her you liked her?"

"No. The other way around."

Kaitani sensed in Fujiwara's face a subtle air of superiority when he said this. "But you've had your eye on her for a while?"

"We work at the same company, so we weren't strangers. But, no, she hadn't made that indelible of an impression. I'm not with anyone in particular right now. Neither do I have any good reason to turn anyone down. So we started seeing each other."

Kaitani had spent the last month and more suffering over his love for Fujiwara. It just didn't sit right with him that a girl feeling exactly the same longings could hook up with Fujiwara so easily.

"Thus far, I have never told a woman that I

loved her first. The woman has always acted on her initiative instead. And though I may eventually break off the relationship, no woman has ever dumped me."

It was hardly surprising that Fujiwara's pursuit of women had gone on uninterrupted. That fact alone could be explained by his bewitching charms. But, still, it annoyed Kaitani.

"In other words, at this point in time, there hasn't been anyone that you've fallen in love with?"

"Of course there's been."

"Except that you've never been the one who said so. Rather, now and then you've fallen in love with somebody who's already fallen in love with you. Isn't that the case?"

Fujiwara looked offended and refused to answer.

"No matter how popular you are with the women, if a person you like doesn't fall for you first, they're not getting to first base with you, are they?"

"Like you said, it would be best for me to get involved with somebody whom I love rather than the other way around. But the reality is, that's not going to happen. Even if it's the last thing on my mind, the general pattern is that once we hook up, I'll come around to liking her."

Kaitani could find no fault with what Fujiwara was saying. Still, he refused to concede the argument. "Well, then, when you first begin dating a girl that you don't really care for, it's simply an excuse to have sex."

Fujiwara furrowed his brows and glowered at Kaitani. "Yes, were I to mention that the view of

the nighttime sky is quite pretty from my living room window, and she responds that she'd like to see for herself, I'll go so far as to bring her here. She may be harboring certain expectations, and if the mood arises, then that's the kind of relationship that will develop. Dating is not the end, it is the means. And I don't recall asking for your two cents."

He could make love without feelings of love growing. That's the kind of man he was. The reality of it smashed through Kaitani's heart.

"Everybody experiences love differently. You may not be able to understand my approach to love, but then I've got no reason to try and make you understand. I could go on explaining myself forever, and I doubt it would do any good. Did you have something you wished to discuss with me? You said there was something that required my attention...the travails of your love life, perhaps?"

There was no way he could profess his love in this situation. Kaitani bowed his head and twiddled his thumbs.

"There's a girl you love?"

"Well, sort-of," Kaitani mumbled in reply.

"Who is she? Somebody I know?"

"Yeah. We work together."

Not just somebody he knew, but the selfsame person he was talking to. He couldn't tell him. With the existence of another lover coming to light, along with the true differences in their personalities being revealed, he only got more and more depressed. And discussing all this with the object of his affection was an exercise in

masochism.

"I don't know whether or not I should confess my feelings. When we're at work together, we get along really well, but I find it hard to believe those feelings will ever be reciprocated, or even shared."

"Hmmm," said Fujiwara, leaning forward.

"If I do say what I feel and get rebuffed, then working in the same environment would be intolerable. Things certainly couldn't go back to the way they were. That being the case, continuing with the way things stand right now seems preferable, but I just don't know. If you were me, what would you do?"

The answer to his question came surprisingly fast. "If I were you, I'd tell her that I loved her."

Kaitani swallowed hard. "But . . . but then what do you do if it turns out badly?" Anxiously he waited for the answer.

"Then you abandon the pursuit and cut the whole thing off."

Kaitani could not agree to such a glib solution. "But you can't help who you fall in love with. If you tell somebody you love them, and they say, 'Sorry, no way,' you can't just shrug your shoulders and walk away. It's not easy to throw your feelings away like that."

Fujiwara was quite for a moment. Kaitani awaited his next words with bated breath.

"When it comes to romantic love—" Fujiwara started to say. "Is this really a situation calling for a serious resolution in the manner you speak of?"

"Eh?" said Kaitani.

"You can enjoy the atmosphere the two of you

create together, and satisfy your mutual desires until you both grow weary of it all. And if the two of you turn out not to be compatible, you can always break up, can't you? Romantic love simply cannot constitute the better part of your existence. At best, maybe ten or twenty percent. As for myself, love certainly adds color to my life, but it is not a necessary part of it. I do enjoy setting aside time for such passions, but being bound and tied by them is putting the cart before the horse."

That's just sick, Kaitani almost said. Now he understood the reason why Fujiwara went through women one after the other.

"I believe that melodramatic love should be confined to movies and novels. In actuality, I see nothing exemplary in anything so theatrical." Fujiwara poured himself another glass of wine. "If you really think you love somebody that much, why not just tell them and see what happens? Even if you do and it all comes to naught, or even if you say nothing and let those feelings die a natural death, the end result is the same. That being the case, the more constructive direction becomes that in which the slightest ray of hope can be seen."

Was telling Fujiwara he loved him here and now really his best recourse? Kaitani looked at Fujiwara with these thoughts weighing on his mind.

"Is there some way I could help you to get things rolling? Give the relationship a jump-start?"

A jump-start, Kaitani thought to himself.

"If it's within the department...how about we throw a little drinking party? Without mentioning your name specifically, I'd be happy to ferret out this person's

feelings ahead of time. In that case, even if things end badly, I'm sure the sting of defeat would be lessened."

"Why would you go out of your way for me like that?"

A strange expression came to Fujiwara's face. "Because you wanted my help. Didn't you come here to seek my advice?"

He really is a well-meaning guy, Kaitani thought. Even while criticizing Fujiwara's philosophy of love, he'd simply shrugged it off. And though he was apparently incapable of empathizing with his subordinate's sob story, he had lent an ear and was offering to do what he could to help.

But was Fujiwara hanging out with him simply based on kindness alone? Was inviting him out to dinner two or three times a week just a way of patting himself on the back? Even if Fujiwara didn't share his feelings in the least, Kaitani wanted to know where things stood between them.

"This is something I've been worrying about for a long time now, but why are you being so nice to me?"

Fujiwara blinked slowly.

"You've pretty much ignored me until recently, haven't you? When I hatched that scheme and started picking fights, verbally abusing and blackmailing you, it stood to reason that you would. However, now the gap between us is awfully narrow. You trust me with tough assignments and you take me out to dinner. It all makes me very happy, but I haven't changed at all, so I have to wonder what's going on—"

"You have changed." Their eyes met and

Fujiwara smiled. "The way you apply yourself is nothing like the person you used to be. You tackle your work head-on. In any case, the results show up in the numbers. I haven't been overestimating your talents by handing you more responsibilities. I've been giving you what you are capable of."

Recognizing this as an assessment of his value as an employee, Kaitani's heart jumped and the feelings welled up in his chest.

"As for inviting you to dinner at the end of the workday, I wondered if that might have caused you some consternation. It was my intent not to let the financial burden fall on you. However, if spending time with me starts eating into your private time, and should you find this not to your liking—"

Kaitani shook his head vigorously back and forth. "No problem at all. I enjoy having dinner with you as well. You're quite knowledgeable about many subjects, so talking with you is always interesting. Still, always being the recipient of your generosity doesn't sit well. Look, for the time being, my salary may not measure up to yours, but I'm not a pauper. So let me pay now and then."

Fujiwara put his hand on his forehead, a somewhat disconcerted look on his face. "That's right. You're working for a living as well. It may be better to split things down the middle. Sorry for not taking that into consideration. I tend to be the one treating rather than the one treated, so I may have just been picking up your tab as a matter of course."

He sunk into silence, a concerned look on his

face. It occurred to Kaitani that Fujiwara was worried about how this explanation would go over, so he quickly said, "No, I really appreciate being treated to dinner. I just don't want to get too accustomed to it, that's all."

Fujiwara finished the wine remaining in the glass. "Do you remember me telling you before about how I was teased for a long time about what happened... down there?"

"Um, yes," Kaitani answered.

"That may be the reason I'm not very good at this mano-a-mano stuff. I'm fine with children and old people, and I can talk forever about my work. But in private, I get defensive and lose my train of thought and stumble for words. A mostly female workplace is as agreeable as can be expected, but I have to wonder what it'd be like to have male friends I could talk to without getting so uptight."

Fujiwara's cheeks were touched with red, and not just from the alcohol. "So much has gone on between the two of us, and it appears to have put all my own efforts at self-improvement to shame. Or rather, there's no longer a need to concern myself about such things. I've been able to talk freely, to associate freely with another person. Your position as my subordinate notwithstanding, I am now left to wonder whether this is what it feels like to have friends younger than myself—"

The expression on Fujiwara's face was not that of ennui, or cool disregard. It was the frank and open countenance of a man searching hard for each word with a surprising clumsiness. "Up till now, being in the

presence of women has been a lot easier. But I changed my mind once I came into contact with you. After getting hounded by Tagami at the tavern, your words of encouragement felt really good. At a single stroke, I felt as if the bad blood in my heart had been cleansed and my eyes opened. These things strike me as so trivial when I think back about them now, but thanks to you I've come to terms with them."

A bashful smile came to Fujiwara's lips. Kaitani felt his chest constrict painfully.

"If I could make more male friends like you, I think it would really change my life. And the faster the better. The reason I've invited you to dinner so often is because I haven't ever hung out with men before. Eating and just talking together is all new to me, and quite enjoyable. I've always liked giving things to people, and so I've been forcing them on you as well. But I'm grateful you've let me know that you find it unsettling."

Fujiwara looked at him warily, the moment pregnant with apprehension. Kaitani hastily waved his right hand. "It's not unsettling at all. I'm not exactly a rich man...quite the opposite, so I really appreciate your generosity. Much more than that, I'm happy to know that you feel that way about me. However, and I'm speaking only for myself, but I'm not exactly the smartest kid on the block—"

"You do shoot from the hip, but I think you're an honest person."

From his words and from the mood in the room, despite everything else that had occurred between them, Kaitani felt all the more profoundly that he stood in

Fujiwara's good graces, that Fujiwara perhaps even valued him above the girl he'd sent home in the taxi.

Inside his head, the war of words between Higashiyama and Tomoharu continued to rage:

You've got to think these things through.

A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!

The silence stretched out. Holding the wine glass in his hand, Fujiwara got up from the sofa and approached the window. "The rain is coming down pretty hard."

Standing against the rain-streaked nightscape, his countenance suffused with melancholy, Fujiwara was as beautiful as a perfectly carved sculpture.

"You didn't bring an umbrella. Why don't you stay the night, then? There's no work tomorrow, so we can talk as long as you'd like."

All Kaitani heard was "stay the night." Was he coming on to him? He gulped audibly. "Will you let me sleep in your bed?" he asked.

Fujiwara's eyes narrowed in a smile. "If you can put up with such a narrow bed." He again stared out the window. Determined to keep to his original resolution, Kaitani arose from the sofa and stood behind him.

"I-I love you!"

The tension made his voice louder than he'd intended. Fujiwara started. His body trembling, he turned around.

"Fujiwara-san, I'm in love with you!" He called him by his name, not his title.

With a bewildered look on his face—rather, a somewhat bashful look—Fujiwara answered in a small

voice, "Thank you."

"How do you feel about me, Fujiwara-san?" pressed Kaitani with great intensity.

Fujiwara took a step backward, as if pushed away by the sheer force with which Kaitani demanded an answer. "You're a good worker, and a good friend."

"Fujiwara-san, how do I rank with you?" When he tilted his head to the side as if he didn't quite understand the question, Kaitani added, "The girl you sent home in the taxi, is she more important to you than I am?"

"Why ask me a question like that?" He still had that uncomprehending look on his face.

"It may seem foolish to you, but this really matters to me. Please, give me your answer."

Kaitani bowed his head and waited for Fujiwara's reply. After a short silence, he heard the word he was waiting for: "You." He raised his head joyously.

"Lovers can be replaced," Fujiwara explained, "but I have the feeling there's no replacing you."

In the moment Kaitani thought he had won, he wrapped Fujiwara's body in a strong embrace.

"K-Kaitani?"

Fujiwara's whole body tightened in confusion. Kaitani released him and instead grasped his surprisingly slender wrists.

"I love you. I'm crazy about you. I want to have a serious relationship with you."

"When you say you love me—" Fujiwara repeated, in obvious confusion.

"I'm more important to you than that girl. I want

you to take me as a lover. This really means a lot to me."

Fujiwara shook his arms, trying to extricate himself. "Stop kidding around. Let go of my hands."

Kaitani stubbornly wouldn't let go. "I'm not kidding around. I've been thinking this over for a month now. I love you."

Kaitani drew nearer and kissed his white cheek. A spark of anger flashed across Fujiwara's face. "Why did you kiss me without my permission?"

"B-Because you're so cute."

Fujiwara's eyes blazed like a demon's. "For a long time I've thought there was something suspicious about you. You're gay, aren't you?"

Frozen in his tracks, Kaitani thought it over for a minute. "I can't say whether I'm gay or not. But I do love you. I really do."

"You must be joking. There's no way I would make you my lover, or have a physical relationship with you!"

Kaitani's shoulders shook with frustration. "You're being unfair. You do it with every girl you date, so why not with me? I really love you. That's all I can think about every day."

"What do you mean, unfair? Use some bloody common sense." Seizing the moment, using both his arms and legs, he pushed the unprepared Kaitani away from him. Kaitani fell backward, hitting his head against the window. He heard a loud crash and felt a sharp pain in the back of his skull. Something sparkled in front of his eyes, and then he lost consciousness.

When he came to again, Kaitani was stretched out on the bed. Fujiwara was kneeling next to him, his face pale. "Kaitani, Kaitani," he called out his name.

"Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"I think so. My head hurts."

Fujiwara closed his eyes, pressed his hand to his chest and sighed. "When you wouldn't open your eyes, I was afraid you were dead. I was going to call an ambulance—"

With the relief that showed on his face, Fujiwara was so cute it almost made Kaitani gasp. "I love you."

Fujiwara suddenly shivered and pulled back. Pressing his hand against the back of his throbbing head, Kaitani sat up on the bed and turned to Fujiwara.

"I love you. I love you more than any woman you've ever had a relationship with before."

"You don't really know that, do you? You don't have the necessary data. Once again, you're falling back on your personal, subjective opinions."

"I don't need any proof. I firmly believe that I'm number-one in your heart. I don't care if you're missing a testicle; you're handsome and sexy and kind—my beautiful, hardworking, Fujiwara."

The thoroughly perplexed expression on Fujiwara's face gradually suffused with pity. He softly placed his hands on Kaitani's shoulders. "Calm down. No matter how passionately you profess your love, I am still a man. I'm not going to deny that I enjoy sex, but I don't do it with men. I'm sorry."

Kaitani grasped the hands placed on his shoulders and clenched them tightly. "That's fine with

me. I'll do everything."

"You'll do—?" Fujiwara queried, hiking up an eyebrow.

"I'll hold you in my arms. No, I want you to hold me!" In the blink of an eye, a look froze on Fujiwara's face. Kaitani spread his arms wide. "You don't have to worry about anything. It'll be like taking a pleasure cruise on an ocean liner—"

A blow caught him on the side of the head. When Kaitani wrapped his arms around his head and turned his glance upward, Fujiwara was clenching his fist and trembling with anger. "What ocean liner? Your boat is a broken-down dinghy, a hole-filled rubber raft. As soon as I climbed aboard, it'd sink!"

"I can patch up the holes with duct tape. That's why—"

"Why must you take things this far? Why must I have sex with you?"

Kaitani was at a loss for word. "Because . . . because I love you."

"Just because you say you're in love with someone doesn't mean you can have sex with them regardless of their feelings. That's a crime, isn't it?"

Heartbroken, Kaitani hung his head. He sighed, and the sound of his breath was harsh in his ears. If Fujiwara being his superior trumped being his lover, however hard he might pin his hopes on gaining his acceptance, it would prove a dead-end. In other words, he was doomed to failure. The feeling welled up in his chest that he had no choice but to give up. But if he ran away, what would become of him? He'd be back at

square one, kicking that can down the road.

Fujiwara looked at him with an expression that said he was sick to death of the whole affair. In a flash, Higashiyama's words came back to Kaitani. He realized that this is what happens when everything hits the fan—what Higashiyama had warned him about. Higashiyama had been counseling him in preparation for exactly this moment.

Kaitani tried to imagine giving up and going home. They'd find whatever reason to avoid each other at the office, and before he knew it, he'd be transferred to another division. And Fujiwara would go back to being Fujiwara, the libertine churning through lovers one after another.

There's simply no way, Kaitani thought to himself. He couldn't stand the thought of Fujiwara being in anybody's arms but his own. Yes, he could stand Fujiwara not loving him, but only as long as he wasn't loved by anybody else. He could not stand the injustice of having Fujiwara stolen away from him like this, after loving him the way he did.

The black clouds roiled inside his soul. The way things stood, whether he stayed or went home, he'd end up with the short end of the stick. But if this was to be the end of it, then he wished to be his lover, if for only one night. Kaitani clenched his teeth and knelt down, almost scraping his forehead.

"Please be my lover for just one night—no, one day. After that, I will put you behind me, Fujiwara-san. I won't ever talk to you about being my boyfriend again."

"That's not possible, Kaitani—"

Perhaps Fujiwara didn't remember, but he certainly could if he put his mind to it. To be sure, the last time he'd been high on aphrodisiacs and was stewed to the gills, but they'd done it over and over. Moreover, Fujiwara had really gotten off on it.

"I'm begging you," Kaitani implored.

"I don't care how much you plead, I'm not listening. Get it into your head. Ah—that's right! Didn't you say that you were interested in a girl back when we were talking about my love life? If she's not seeing somebody right now, I'd be happy to introduce the two of you."

Kaitani's mouth dropped open. Despite going to such lengths to tell Fujiwara that he loved him, Fujiwara still wouldn't recognize the reality of the situation. Kaitani had gone so far as to beg to spend a night with him as his lover, yet here was Fujiwara offering to set him up with another woman.

"I don't care about any other woman. The person I'm in love with is you!"

There was nothing that could substitute for his passion, nobody who could stand in for the person he loved. He just wasn't talking about his physical lusts. His heart desired Fujiwara as well, but because turning Fujiwara around with his heart struck him as practically impossible, he had only dared to ask for his body. Doing so might serve as a stopgap for his suffering spirit and his famished emotions. And then starting tomorrow, they'd associate together as if nothing had happened, and he'd try to soldier on alone. . . .

An interminably long silence followed. Kaitani swallowed and awaited Fujiwara's answer.

"Saying you love me is the ultimate expression of a subjective emotion." Fujiwara spoke slowly, as if to ensure the accuracy of each word. "It's wonderful if such feelings are mutually recognized, but this is often not the case. Having once shared the same ground, the responsibilities for any problems that crop up afterward can thus be shared equally. However, in your case, you are indeed carrying on a one-sided affair. However painful, however you try to put these things behind you, these are ultimately your feelings alone. You do realize, do you not, that any emotions directed toward me are not my concern?"

A stab of pain went through Kaitani's heart.

"To put it in the simplest terms, no matter how much I am told that I am loved and how much you suffer, I have no obligation to become your significant other."

Kaitani's head and gut simultaneously flared up. No matter how thick-skinned, a man had his limits. This wasn't a matter of obligations. If this relationship was a non-starter, then Fujiwara should be kind enough to say it was a non-starter and be done with it. Rather than making a whipping boy out of him or spelling out logical arguments, Kaitani just wanted Fujiwara to listen to what he had to say: things like how he'd come to love him, and when he'd fallen in love with him.

This man had not a drop of empathy toward him. As disagreeable as it might be, Fujiwara had to realize this.

"Fine, then," Kaitani said. If theirs was a

relationship in which emotion played no part, then he would do away with sentimentality as well. What is on your mind, what is in your heart, what you love or hate—I'll ignore all of it.

"If you don't sleep with me, then I'll distribute those compromising photographs to everybody in the company." He turned off his conscience and spoke without remorse. He hit below the belt.

And sure enough, Fujiwara looked like he'd just bitten down on a lemon. "Give me a break. Didn't we just dispose of that whole business with the photograph and how you were so sorry about everything? And now you're bringing it up all over again?"

"I don't care if you think I'm being sneaky or underhanded. You won't listen to anything else I say. And not just the company, but send them to your clients, post them on the Internet, plaster them all over your apartment building. Unless you want me to ruin your life, then become my lover for just one day."

Fujiwara ground his back teeth and glared at Kaitani. He took a step forward and brought the palm of his hand hard across Kaitani's face. "Scum," he sneered. "I didn't think until now that you were such a jackass. And I was certainly a fool for expecting anything better from a bastard like you."

Kaitani gulped and tasted blood in his mouth. "I don't care what expectations you had for me. All I want is for you to be my lover for just one day."

"Get out," Fujiwara growled, and pointed toward the living room door.

"I've made up my mind. I'm staying."

"Whose home do you think this is? Leave, already. I don't want to see your face."

Without another word, Kaitani grasped Fujiwara's arm and pushed him back onto the sofa. Catching him by off guard, he hovered over the startled man.

"W-What are you doing?"

Kaitani pressed his weight against Fujiwara's body, pinned back his arms, and kissed him, tenaciously pursuing his fleeting, unwilling lips. In the course of the pursuit, as if abandoning the effort, Fujiwara stopped resisting. Yet he wouldn't open his mouth to Kaitani's thrusting tongue.

So he devoured his mouth with his lips alone, and then raised his head. Fujiwara glared back at him with a loathsome look in his eyes, and spat in his face. "Scumbag," he said, a low rumble in his voice.

Kaitani wiped off the saliva with his shirtsleeve and licked it with his tongue. When he looked at the man pinned beneath him, Fujiwara stared back with startled eyes.

"I'm completely serious," Kaitani said, fixing his eyes on Fujiwara. "At this point, I don't give a damn what happens next."

Fujiwara violently shoved Kaitani off him and tumbled from the sofa. Sensing his desire to flee, Kaitani tore after him, overtaking him in the hallway and tackling him from the rear. Limbs tangled together, he brought him down in the narrow hallway. Fujiwara clawed at the air like a drowning man as Kaitani desperately clung to his back. After a while, Fujiwara calmed down. All that

could be heard was faint panting of breath.

Kaitani firmed his hold on Fujiwara's arms. "I'm telling you, just one day, that's all I want." Fujiwara's back trembled. "Give it up already. In the end, everything always works out to your advantage. One time only, and all your problems go away."

A sweet smell wafted up from where Kaitani's face pressed against the back of his neck.

"I'm begging you," he pleaded to Fujiwara's mute back. A long silence followed. Then, amid the sound of their mutual breathing, he heard a voice.

"All right, then. One time." Kaitani's head shot up. "One time only," he said in a firm tone of voice, "and then we pretend it never happened."

"Fine!" Kaitani answered loudly.

"You're heavy," Fujiwara grunted. "Are you going to keep sitting on my back forever?"

Kaitani quickly released him. Fujiwara sat up and casually swept back his unkempt hair. Their eyes met for a moment, and Fujiwara bluntly averted his gaze. A small thing, but the gesture stabbed at his heart.

"Um—can I kiss you?"

Fujiwara did not reply. Kaitani crawled up to the seated man on his hands and knees. When he brought his lips closer to kiss him, Fujiwara turned away. He made another attempt and was rebuffed. The third time, Kaitani seized the tip of Fujiwara's narrow chin and finally kissed him. Upper lip alternately pressed against lower lip, and he conscientiously sucked on his mouth. And then thrust his tongue into that warm, moist place. Perhaps not expecting Kaitani's intent to kiss him so

firmly, Fujiwara's tongue cowered at the back of his mouth. Without forcing himself, Kaitani enthusiastically stroked the roof of his mouth and the back of his throat.

A small groan escaped from Fujiwara's nostrils. Kaitani became aware of the impatient tip of his tongue at the back of his mouth. Without a moment's delay, Kaitani entwined their tongues together. Pursued him, enveloped him, prodding the recessed of his mouth. Having reached the limits of such relentless kissing, Fujiwara tore his face away.

"Enough already!"

Saliva glimmered on his faintly red lips. His flushed cheeks and the rosy orbs of his eyes more than doubled the sexy allure of his visage.

Kaitani got to his feet. He seized the arm of the still-sitting Fujiwara, pulled him to his feet, and brought him to the bedroom. After closing the bedroom door, he wrapped his arms around his reluctant partner. Even if for only one day, they would become lovers in this room, together. Kaitani stroked his beautiful, surprisingly soft, unblemished cheek. Gently stroking his tousled hair, his brushed the tip of his nose against Fujiwara's.

With a touch of nervousness, Kaitani put his hands on the second button of Fujiwara's shirt.

"Take a shower first."

"Eh?" said Kaitani, tilting his head to the side.

"I said, go take a shower. I am simply not into getting it on with sweaty, smelly people."

"Oh . . . okay."

Kaitani rushed out of the room and ran to the bathroom. He knew an aesthete like Fujiwara preferred

a clean body, but he didn't exactly have a lot of time on his hands. He scrubbed himself down in five minutes. After debating whether to get dressed or not, he wrapped a towel around his waist and returned to the bedroom.

Fujiwara was still there, but he left as soon as Kaitani came in, as if they were trading places. Kaitani assumed he was going to take a shower as well.

Alone, Kaitani brooded to himself. He was traveling the low road, begging and pleading and finally using the photograph to take advantage of the reluctant Fujiwara. It was cowardly, what he'd done. He realized that it would have been much kinder to have simply said, "Fine. I give. Don't give it a second thought" when Fujiwara had first rebuffed him. He knew this, but even if he had put up a brave front, he would have given it a second thought. Rather than looking good and regretting it privately, he would rather disgracefully blubber and paw the ground and pay the price in public.

It pained him to think that Fujiwara now hated him more than he had ever had since their relationship began. No good could come from using that photograph as the pretext to demand his body, and as the basis for building their entire relationship, not to mention the fact that he was giving Fujiwara all the more reason to distrust people, and branding more stripes on his soul. This time, he was the person inflicting the wounds that would never heal.

He suddenly came back to his senses and looked at the clock on the wall. Twenty minutes had passed since Fujiwara had left the room. Afraid that he'd run away, he stole back to the bathroom to check things out.

He heard the sound of the shower. He put his hand to his chest in relief. However, this might be followed up by a long soak in the tub, and the thought of a forty-minute wait was making him antsy. He took a second look. The water was running as it was before.

He didn't, did he? Kaitani thought, and opened the bathroom door. His worst fears struck home. The shower was indeed running, but he couldn't see Fujiwara anywhere.

Kaitani stood there dumbfounded. Regaining his composure, he searched from the living room to the kitchen, and finally in the closets. Fujiwara was nowhere to be found. He returned to the bedroom in despair, sat down on the edge of the bed, and held his head in his hands. In this situation, he had no idea what to do next. Should he wait until Fujiwara got home again? But when would that be?

All cranked up and ready to go, he hesitated, miserably sitting there with just the towel wrapped around his waist. He considered putting on his undershorts, but he'd left them in the dressing room. He slowly got to his feet and exited the bedroom. He was headed toward the dressing room when he heard a rattling sound from the living room.

He spun around and peeked into the living room. Through the living room, he saw Fujiwara standing in the kitchen. Though relieved that he hadn't taken off, Kaitani still couldn't help wondering what had happened to him during his previous search.

Fujiwara was wearing the same shirt and slacks as when he'd left the bedroom. He took a long

and narrow box from a paper bag. Inside the box was a container shaped like a wine bottle. Even from a distance Kaitani knew what it was. Yet he couldn't raise his voice against the desperate looking man.

The dark red liquid he poured from the bottle filled two wine glasses. Fujiwara took a small bottle from the cupboard behind him, shook the pills into his palm, and slowly stirred them only into the glass in front of him with a swizzle stick.

Possessed by the feeling he was watching something he shouldn't, Kaitani turned away from the scene before him. The pills Fujiwara had mixed into the one wine glass couldn't be . . . poison, could they? A cold shiver ran down his back as he imagined himself in the death throes of some toxin.

"H-How long were you standing there?" Fujiwara demanded, his voice unusually shrill.

"I happened to pass by just now. I was going to the bathroom," he said, making up the lie on the spur of the moment.

"Oh," muttered Fujiwara, a relieved expression on his face.

"Fujiwara-san, have you showered yet?"

In the same moment, Fujiwara averted his gaze. "I had a phone call about work," he said under his breath, and almost ran toward the bathroom.

After watching him leave, Kaitani strode into the kitchen. He checked the mysterious dark red bottle and saw that it was not wine, but a domestically-made nutritional supplement. He opened the kitchen cupboard. There by itself was the small bottle. He picked it up with

trembling fingers. The printing on the bottle identified it not as poison but as sleeping pills.

Watching Fujiwara mix the nutritional supplement and the sleeping pills together, a thought had suddenly struck him. Kaitani finally understood the meaning of Fujiwara's strange behavior. Fujiwara would have him drink the concoction, and no matter what he wanted to do in bed, he wouldn't be able to: Fujiwara was trying to put him into a sleepy, muddled state. Trying to wrap his head around the purpose of the nutritional supplement business, he concluded that Fujiwara had selected a drink whose taste wouldn't be noticeably changed by the drugs.

So Fujiwara was steeling himself, preparing for the worst. But while believing he'd seized the initiative, that he was in fact desperate enough to duck and run struck Kaitani as somehow endearing. He picked up the wine glass containing the sleeping pills and was about to dump it down the drain and refill it with the un-spiked nutritional supplement, but stopped himself.

Instead, he subtly switched the places of the two wine glasses and returned to the bedroom, pretending to be none the wiser.

Chapter 7

Fujiwara entered the bedroom wearing a bathrobe captivating enough to start a nosebleed. He carried a tray in his right hand. On the tray were the two aforementioned wine glasses. He placed the tray on the bedside table and handed Kaitani the glass on the right.

"What's this?" Kaitani asked.

Fujiwara swept back his damp bangs with his right hand. "Something I always drink before I go to bed at night. I was wondering what you thought of it."

Kaitani held his nose and swallowed the nutritional supplement in the wine glass. It seemed to Kaitani that Fujiwara was holding his breath as he watched him drink.

"Aren't you going to have any?"

Following Kaitani's lead, Fujiwara downed the drink in a single shot. As he finished it off, though, he launched into a coughing fit. Kaitani ran over and patted Fujiwara's rounded back. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm okay."

Even red-faced and eyes tearing, he was cute. Kaitani took hold of Fujiwara's arm and sat him down next to him on the side of the bed. His bathrobe was open, exposing his beautifully tinted nipples. Perhaps taking note of his gaze, Fujiwara drew his robe tightly around his chest. When Kaitani pulled back on his shoulders, trying to disrobe him, he quickly pulled it on.

And when he drew closer to kiss him, Fujiwara put his hands up to check his progress.

"I am somewhat unwilling to have relations with you as things currently stand," he said, a determined expression on his face. "Therefore, it would be best if we proceeded after reaching some modicum of mutual understanding."

"Understanding?" Kaitani echoed.

"Why don't we chat for a while? We really don't know anything about each other's private lives."

Until now, they had gone out to eat together any number of times. If not perfectly, he still understood a great deal about Fujiwara's character and personality. And Fujiwara should know plenty enough about himself. Puzzling over why the subject should come up now, the reality of the situation hit him. Fujiwara was waiting him out, waiting for the sleeping pills to kick in, at which point Kaitani couldn't do a thing. This business of reaching a "mutual understanding" was a mere pretense. The real purpose was to waste time.

"The night is long. Spending a few minutes talking won't hurt. And anyway, aren't you even capable of disconnecting your mind from your genitals for at least twenty or thirty minutes?"

Taking offense at this cheap shot, Kaitani responded, "I am perfectly capable of that."

Fujiwara smiled and tightened the sash of his bathrobe. Quite seriously he said, "Tell me about your family. . . ."

Chapter 8

It was eleven o'clock when Kaitani opened his eyes. Sunlight peeked through the gaps in the curtain so brightly that it turned last night's rain into a figment of his imagination. He sluggishly moved his right hand, searching for the man that should be next to him. With a great sense of relief, his fingertips touched that soft, moist warmth.

With a big yawn, he sat up. Fujiwara was sleeping face down next to him. His shuttered eyelids were slightly swollen. The lips that yesterday had over and over emitted such sweet gasps were not firmly closed. He had kissed him so many times, touched him, and savored the depths of him. Though the memory remained fresh in his mind, he wanted to touch him again.

Last night, after conversing for almost fifteen minutes, Fujiwara couldn't stop yawning. He repeatedly blinked and rubbed his eyes. After thirty minutes, his shook his whole body, from head to foot.

"Are you sleepy?" Kaitani had asked.

"Just a bit tired," Fujiwara insisted. Five minutes later he asked, "Don't you want to go to sleep?" After forty minutes, his mouth half-open, he collapsed on the bed.

In that moment, Kaitani lifted the embargo on his heart. He stretched Fujiwara out on the bed, holding

him down as he tried weakly to push him away, and proceeded to make love to him.

No matter how hot under the collar he was, Kaitani had no intention of rushing things. He wanted to get off, but at the same time, he wanted Fujiwara to feel it, too. Using his fingers and tongue, he carefully unlocked the narrow mouth. Then he began by attacking the spot that had driven Fujiwara crazy the last time. Entirely beyond his own expectations, Fujiwara became erect the moment Kaitani penetrated him. Fujiwara's body trembled. Lascivious moans spilled from his lips that, in the end, like something was breaking forth from deep inside, fell into sync with the rhythm of Kaitani's movements.

He loved Fujiwara all through the night, in the missionary position, doggie style, side-to-side. And now that dreamlike time continued. He covered the sleeping man as if he was swooning and nibbled at his earlobes. When he plunged his tongue into his finely-formed ear, Fujiwara's white, bared shoulders trembled. He turned over, and perhaps finding even the soft light too brilliant, closed his eyes. The small crease in his brow was quite charming. Kaitani kissed his half-opened lips, and slid the tip of his tongue into Fujiwara's undefended mouth.

Wrapping his arms around his small head, Kaitani repeatedly kissed him deeply. Their unswallowed saliva streaked down Fujiwara's cheeks and soaked into the sheets. After having had his way with him, and sating himself to exhaustion, Kaitani fixed his gaze on Fujiwara's face. His eyes were blurred and red.

"You are so cute," Kaitani said, licking away



the traces of tears at the corners of his eyes. "How can anybody be so adorable?" he whispered softly in his ear. "You're too cute to be believed." He hugged him tightly. Affixed to him thusly, he grew hard. Despite having done it and done it and done it, he had an insatiable cock. Apparently noticing this change in him as well, Fujiwara forcefully twisted his body and tried to slip out of Kaitani's grasp.

"Oh, sorry. Any condoms left?"

"No," Fujiwara said, shaking his head weakly.

Kaitani had used the last of the Like a Virgin condoms Tomoharu had given him. When he proposed that they do it bareback, Fujiwara squirmed. Kaitani said, "Look, I won't come inside you. I'll pull it out like this—"

He pushed his excited member against the thoroughly softened orifice. Just a little more pressure and the tip would be inside him. Just then, Fujiwara said, "The table drawer."

In the drawer Kaitani found a box bearing a certain name-brand logo he recognized. Impressed that the company in question made condoms as well, he pulled one on and turned around. Fujiwara slid over to the side of the bed as if readying himself to flee.

Kaitani caught and tackled him. Facing him in the missionary position, he spread Fujiwara's legs wide. As Kaitani tried to force him open and give him his sex, Fujiwara reluctantly swung his loins left and right.

Kaitani grasped his slender waist and penetrated. Fujiwara let out a small scream. Shifting his angle of attack, Kaitani plunged deeper, until his pubic bone hit

Fujiwara's scrotum. He gently rocked back and forth, sure of what he felt when he penetrated shallowly, but Fujiwara also seemed to enjoy it when he thrust all the way inside him.

"Ah—" The tenor of his gasps changed. The man under him trembled in his arms.

Fujiwara shrieked again, and quickly covered his mouth with his hands, but with every thrust, the sound of his cries escaped from between his fingers. Delighted with his reaction, Kaitani concentrated his finger play on Fujiwara's small nipples. His stomach grew damp, and when he looked down at his groin, he saw Fujiwara's precum painting white lines across his belly.

"Your penis is paler than mine, Fujiwara-san." Already at war with his senses, Fujiwara's countenance instantly reddened. Kaitani went on, "No so much light brown as pink. It's really sexy when you're aroused."

"Stop talking already."

"No, I mean it. It's really erotic. Here, I'll show you."

"That's fine, that's fine," squealed Fujiwara.

Despite his objections, and still inside him, Kaitani raised his hips. "See. It's a lighter color than mine."

The precum dripped from the pink tip onto Fujiwara's stomach. Kaitani oscillated his body back and forth in that position. Before long, Fujiwara shot his desire onto his own chest.

Kaitani sat back on the bed. Remaining coupled to Fujiwara, he lifted him onto his knees. While swaying his hips gently back and forth, he sucked on the nipples

there in front of his face.

"My legs hurt." Kaitani raised his head. Fujiwara's tear-streaked face looked down at him. "It chafes, it stings. You promised it was just for one night. Look, it's already morning."

Kaitani licked the down-turned mouth with the tip of his tongue. "You don't like doing it?"

"Of course not!" he shouted in a hoarse voice. "How many times have we done it?"

Kaitani glanced down at Fujiwara's pink, clearly erect penis, its tip spurting cum. When he firmly grasped the taut head, Fujiwara raised a gravelly cry, tightening to a painful degree on Kaitani inside him.

"You don't like it, and yet you're hard?"

"T-This is some sort of mistake." Fujiwara averted his eyes from the lower half of his body. "It's not right. It's not right at all. Things like this shouldn't be all right."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it at all."

"Shut up!"

Yelling when they were so close hurt his ears. Kaitani drew his brows together. "Nothing wrong at all, I'm telling you. You make such cute sounds with your mouth and get erect because it feels good. If you really didn't like it, you wouldn't react like this."

Unwilling to acknowledge the truth even when it was there in front of his face, Fujiwara shook his head back and forth. "That isn't so! I'm not like this."

Kaitani puffed out his cheeks and sighed. His planted a kiss on the obstinate, complaining lips.

Fujiwara looked down at him, a sullen expression on his face.

"If you say it isn't so, then fine, it isn't so. Oh, that's right. Our deal last night was for a day, not just one night. So you have to be my lover until tonight. And while you're my lover, you can't leave this bed. If you have to go to the bathroom, you have to ask my permission, and I'll take you there in my arms. If you get hungry, or get thirsty, you can't do anything about it yourself. Only I can feed you. Your feet can't touch the floor. Break the rules and your sentence as my lover gets extended to a full week."

"You're always, always changing the terms of the agreement after the fact."

Kaitani brushed Fujiwara's tearful cheek with his own. Then, while tightly hugging the kneeling man and holding their final destination firmly in-mind, he initiated large, undulating motions with his hips. Fujiwara quickly wrapped his arms around Kaitani's neck and hung on for dear life.

"Ah . . . no . . . no . . . no . . ."

Fujiwara's low, husky voice reverberated from his eardrums to his groin, setting it afire.

"Ah . . . yes . . . yes . . . yes . . ."

It wasn't only his pink penis; his voice was also incredibly sexy. He thought of telling Fujiwara this, but didn't. If he dared say anything, he was afraid that Fujiwara would stop panting in that seductively erotic voice of his.

Chapter 9

The month of October was more than half over, and the nights turned from merely cool to cold. But the weather remained clear and the afternoons were hot. Kaitani was participating in the planning for the line of anti-aging skin care products that Osada hoped to introduce after KASHA. Kaitani found himself back in cram school, this time studying up on skin and aging.

Whenever he had a spare moment at work, he read through the documents given to him by Osada. He was surprised by the hard data about the damage ultraviolet rays did to the epidermis, and got to thinking that perhaps he should be using sunblock more often. He had started worrying about subjects completely unrelated to work when he heard Osada calling to him.

"Kaitani, this is more about KASHA, but I heard they'll be shipping promotional tchotchkes with the point-of-sales merchandise. Sounds like a good idea, don't you think?"

Kaitani lifted his head from the documents he was perusing. "Shipping tchotchkes with the sales merchandise? That subject did come up. But, unlike women, because the percentage of men who'd buy a product simply to sample it turned out to be so small, I believe the proposal was turned down."

"Yes, but—" Osada sighed. "Because a debuting actor was signed as the official spokesperson for KASHA,

the advertising overhead should be minimal. That presents us with something of a problem down the road, don't you think?"

"What sort of problem?"

"By going cheap this time around, there's the possibility that the bean counters will lowball us on the advertising budget for the next product rollout. 'You pulled it off for this much last time, so this time—' That kind of thing. My project is next in line, and I really want to use Michiko Iida as our spokesperson. In that case, no matter what we do, the marketing is going to cost a bundle, so I definitely don't want us to start pinching pennies now."

Kaitani nodded. "Yeah, I see where you're coming from."

"I talked to the Section Chief about it and got the go-ahead. So, Kaitani, what kind of tchotchkes really grab your attention? I know product samples don't work with men, so my other idea was a cell phone strap. That's playing it safe, I know. We have data for women, but nothing for men. I'm stuck. I dug up some information about soft drink branding, but the overwhelming favorites indicated that men like action figures. When you think action figures, though, you tend to think fanboy types, otaku. KASHA is a unique enough brand already, so I don't know if a figurine—"

Osada sat there with her arms folded, a crease of consternation growing between her eyebrows.

"I see," said Kaitani. "I don't have any data like that on hand, but I'll check it out. Promotional tchotchkes, eh—"

"I really am up a creek on this one. And with so little time," she grumbled, sitting down in the chair next to him. Kaitani opened a browser and did searches on keywords like omake (bonus material), shokugan (small toys sold with food), and assorted Cracker Jack-type novelties.

"You've sure got your nose to the grindstone, Kaitani," Osada said, mostly to herself.

"What was that?"

"What I said was, you've really buckled down. You started out as the type who left everything up to everybody else, but you took the initiative on your own accord and accomplished a lot. The KASHA project was quite the turning point."

"Yeah, I guess so," he said, scratching at the back of his head.

"And I have to say that recently you've been taking care of yourself better, too. None of that bed hair anymore, no more showing up late to work. Your suits are pressed and you even change your shirt every day. Must be the influence of our aesthetically-minded Section Chief."

The mention of Fujiwara's name made him start a bit. Osada wasn't wrong in her assessment.

"Come to mention it, you and the Section Chief have been pretty buddy-buddy as of late."

The way she said "buddy-buddy," it sounded more romantic than fraternal. Kaitani felt himself growing hot under the collar. There wasn't a particle of affection to be found in the way Fujiwara berated him at work. They didn't even shake hands. Kaitani glanced

over his shoulder, but Fujiwara wasn't at his desk. He seemed to recall that he'd mentioned something about attending a conference starting at noon.

"B-But even though we get along well now—" he stammered. He was typing at the same time, and his thumb slipped off the spacebar and landed on the letter B, printing a line of characters on the screen. He quickly erased it.

"You have a lot of meetings, and leave work together all the time, don't you? Compared to before, the vibe I get off the two of you has improved a whole lot. To be honest, it's a relief. You and the Section Chief practically came to blows over the revisions to the KASHA lotion. I was pretty sure it was only a matter of time until you got booted off the team."

Grasping that she wasn't intimating that he and Fujiwara were engaged in an "office romance," Kaitani put his hand on his chest in relief. But when he really thought things through, there was no way their relationship could come across like that. When it came to his personal life, Fujiwara never talked, and Kaitani had spoken only to Higashiyama and Tomoharu.

"At first I thought he was an arrogant SOB, but once I got to know him, he turned out to be a nice guy."

Osada shrugged. "So, you finally figured that out, huh? He's pretty strict when it comes to his job, and he is something of a narcissist, but the Section Chief is a good man. You're a slow learner."

Kaitani laughed wryly. Osada suddenly stuck her face right next to his and said, lowering her voice to a whisper, "Hey, do you know if he's seeing anybody

right now?"

Kaitani's heart suddenly began to pound. Sweat broke out on his forehead. "W-What are you asking me a question like that for?"

Osada drew her eyebrows together in a display of consternation. "A friend of mine has been making a nuisance of herself, begging me to introduce him to her. She saw some pictures I took at the bon voyage party we threw for Kuge and fell in love with him at first sight. She's practically perched herself on my doorstep, bending my ear every chance she gets, but I haven't agreed to anything. If I can tell her he's already got a girl, I'm sure she'll give up, except I'm not up on the latest gossip regarding the Section Chief's love life. A month ago, he was dating a girl named Saito from Accounting, but the word is they broke up after a week. Have you heard anything about who he's hooked up with since?"

A girl falling in love with Fujiwara at first sight—this was something he couldn't let pass unaddressed.

"Hey, don't guys fess up about stuff like that to their friends?"

Fujiwara was ostensibly "unattached." But Kaitani had the feeling that if he communicated this information to Osada, that girlfriend of hers would make a beeline for Fujiwara. Kaitani made a great show of furrowing his brow and folded his arms. "In fact, the Section Chief is currently seeing somebody."

Osada nodded. I thought so, her expression said. "Makes sense. Women just can't keep their hands off him. So, who's it this time? You know, don't you?"

"Well—um—" Kaitani hesitated. "Yeah, sure. But as for her name—"

"Oh, don't get all high-principled on me. Out with it. But if you can't tell me her name, perhaps this is a married woman—?"

Kaitani waved his hand back and forth. "Nothing of the sort. The Section Chief is always very strict about things like that. However, this time around, it's best that these things be kept close to the vest. That's just my personal judgment, though."

He wasn't about to say that the person Fujiwara had hooked up with was himself. He kept up the facade, but Osada tenaciously pressed for an answer. "Who? Who is it?"

Yielding to her persistence, Kaitani let slip his own desires. "This time, the Section Chief has got himself the real thing."

Osada's eyes glittered like those of a feline tracking down her prey. "C'mon, details, details! If he's not just fooling around, he must be seriously thinking about marriage!"

"That's the general idea," he agreed, for the time being going along with her assumptions.

"I thought so," Osada muttered.

"You thought so?"

"Recently, the Section Chief has been in quite a good mood. Even his countenance has softened up a bit. His skin has improved. He's three times as sexy as he used to be. He's just got an aura of happiness around him."

"Really?"

"Really." Answering with total confidence, Osada clapped him on the back and queried, "Now, what are you looking so bashful for?"

Chapter 10

It was Friday night and they had the next day off. They were in Fujiwara's whirlpool together; Kaitani wanted to experience the hot tub with his lover. Surrounded by frothy white bubbles and drenched by the billowing steam—in this truly dreamlike atmosphere, his lover Fujiwara was chewing his head off.

"I couldn't believe my ears! Starting first thing in the morning, everybody—and I mean everybody—kept asking me when I was getting engaged! And when the wedding was scheduled! And to find that you were the source the rumors!"

Kaitani shook his head back and forth. "I-I just accidentally told Osada that you were really serious this time. That's all!"

"Nevertheless, misinforming her did damage enough. Never underestimate the power of women and gossip."

Fujiwara was sitting in his lap, facing him in the large bathtub. In this lovey-dovey atmosphere, Kaitani found being the target of such an unsparing reprimand was not a little trying.

Fujiwara's sigh echoed off the walls of the bathroom. "Please pay more attention to what you're going to say before you open your mouth." Kaitani's irritated lover swayed back and forth in his lap.

Kaitani said, "But if I said you were unattached,

Osada would have gone ahead and introduced this friend of hers, who supposedly fell in love with you at first sight."

"In that case, you could have just said that I was attached. Hinting around at marriage or an engagement is bound to cause uproar."

"Sorry." He bowed his head in remorse. He was sullenly popping the bubbles the two of them should have been enjoying together when he felt a soft tugging on his right earlobe.

"What's done is done, but take more care next time."

There wasn't any anger in his eyes. Far from it, his eyes were unusually alluring. "Yes," said Kaitani, at the same time kissing those parted, inviting lips. When he did, Fujiwara's once-angry tongue entwined with his own.

They changed the positions of their mouths, kissing repeatedly. Fujiwara wrapped his arms around Kaitani's neck and kissed him like a child going after candy. After kissing until they were woozy from the lack of oxygen, Kaitani licked the faintly-colored nipples there in front of his eyes.

"Ah ! " Fujiwara groaned with erotic contentment. Sucking at his chest, Kaitani inserted his finger into the heart of his humble sphincter. When he did so, Fujiwara's loins began to undulate in-synch with the movements of his finger. After working him up for ten minutes, Kaitani drew his own cock closer. Fujiwara shook him off with his hips.

"You don't want me inside you?" Kaitani

implored with upturned eyes.

"You're not wearing a rubber. It's just a hassle afterward."

"Like before, I'll clean you off."

"I don't care for it. Last time, you promised me you wouldn't come, but you didn't have the stamina, did you?"

Kaitani recalled the last time they had sex in the bathtub, and he'd promised he wouldn't come. Fujiwara had finally relented. Having sex here was so much different than usual that Kaitani had really gotten excited and hadn't come anywhere close to keeping his promise. Afterward, Fujiwara had called him a liar and wept.

"I'll remember to hold back this time." He was only being judged guilty because of one previous conviction.

"Then hold it back. If you can't hold it back, then lick me instead."

Fujiwara had a somewhat reluctant look on his face, but with resignation he rose to his feet. As a result of Kaitani's ministrations, Fujiwara became rock-hard. Kaitani covered the projecting tower with bubbles. Topped with frothy white, Fujiwara's cock looked like a Creamsicle.

"Don't play around with my penis!"

He glanced up at Fujiwara's red face. "But it's so cute!"

It was honest opinion, but he flicked the foam from Fujiwara's groin. Then thinking it might be fun, Kaitani took the pink, aroused shaft into his mouth. He traced its contours with the tip of his tongue and gave

him head. Sucking on him, he raised his eyes. Fujiwara had his mouth and eyes shut tightly, and he was drawing shallow breaths. His cheeks were rosy, as was the flesh around his eyes.

"Kaitani—" His fingers grabbed at his hair, as if communicating his inability to bear it any longer. "I'm going to come," he said in his sweet, husky voice.

He hips shook and the tip began to ooze precum. Kaitani was sure it wouldn't be long now. Holding the head of his erection in his mouth, he sucked hard, inviting him in. All at once, Fujiwara's hot gushings surged against the back of his throat. He drank down his sweet cum.

Fujiwara softly stroked his cheeks. Kaitani wiped his mouth and raised his head. "It's all right if you do."

"You swallowed it."

"Don't worry about it." Kaitani felt his chest swell. For all of Fujiwara's pride, he cared about him and treated him kindly. Kaitani stood up in the bathtub and took Fujiwara by the arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Let's get out."

"You've had enough of the bubble bath?"

"I've had enough. Let's go to bed."

He didn't even wait for Fujiwara to tie the sash of his bathrobe. He dragged him to the bedroom, pushed him down on the bed, embraced him tightly in his arms, and penetrated him.

"You're a rough one tonight," Fujiwara smiled wryly. "Ahh !" he gasped, arching his slender back, the

bewitching moans spilling from his lips.

He was tight, but open and unresisting. Mounting his writhing body, kissing the gasping lips, Kaitani roughly thrust his hips forward.

This person who teased him with his seductive voice, who aroused such fierce desire in him—a few short hours ago he had been in the office, smartly dressed in his suit, and hard at work. The gap between then and now inflamed Kaitani all the more. He loved both of this man's faces, but especially loved the aroused countenance he showed only to him.

Without withdrawing, he came again. No doubt exhausted by their lovemaking, Fujiwara rolled listlessly on his side. Truth be told, Kaitani was ready to go, but the odds were against it now. Thinking that they could go at it again in the morning, he glued himself to Fujiwara's white back, entwining their legs together. He hugged him tightly, stroked his head, kissed the nape of his neck, and basked in the afterglow.

Of course, he hadn't kept his promise to make Fujiwara his lover for just one day. On that day, Fujiwara had gotten off the bed to go to the bathroom and Kaitani had given him hell for breaking the terms of the "deal." That meant stretching Fujiwara's tenure as his lover to a week. They ate, worked, made love, and slept—day after day losing themselves in the realm of their senses. As their encounters piled up, Fujiwara began to let down his guard, little by little taking to their roles as lovers.

At his moment in time, far from resisting him, Fujiwara initiated their encounters, becoming erect and ejaculating even during anal sex. Although having

originally considered himself a lady's man without peer between the sheets, apparently he could admit to himself that pleasure could also accompany guy-on-guy action as well. Making the most of this arrangement, Kaitani camped out at Fujiwara's apartment two days out of the week, plus Friday and Saturday.

Sleeping entwined together, Kaitani felt something stirring on his chest and opened his eyes. Fujiwara turned over in his sleep and lay face down. Kaitani covered the sleeping man's body with his own and buried his face in the back of his neck. His sweet scent wafted up. Even after taking a shower, and even after sex, his aroma lingered. Perhaps awakened by Kaitani's playfully rubbing his nose against the back of his neck, Fujiwara shrugged his shoulders as if being tickled and rolled over. Kaitani kissed his cute and sleepy lips.

"What's the time?" Fujiwara asked, yawning slightly.

"Twelve o'clock."

"Oh," said Fujiwara, closing his eyes again.

"Hey."

When Kaitani spoke, Fujiwara opened his eyes to slits.

"Does this hurt?" Kaitani softly touched that spot of Fujiwara's with which he had recently pleasuring himself.

"It wasn't that tight."

"I always try to be careful, but I get carried away sometimes, and so I worry. If it's too tight and unpleasant, be sure to tell me."

Blushing, Fujiwara replied with a slight nod.
 "Why do you always smell so nice, Fujiwara-san?"

"Smell?"

"You always have a sweet, delicious odor about you."

"It's cologne," he mumbled, closing his eyes again.

"What brand?" Kaitani pressed, but Fujiwara replied only with a clever smile, and wouldn't reveal the brand. "Could I ask you one other thing? It's something that's been weighing on my mind, though."

"Then why not ask me tomorrow?" Fujiwara asked, drawing his brows together.

"Do you know what my given name is?"

"It's Yasukazu."

"But the real reading of the characters—?"

After a short pause, Fujiwara mumbled, "Anna."

"How do you know that? I never told anybody at work."

Still pretending to be asleep, Fujiwara swept his bangs back from his forehead. "Your resume included the phonetic reading for your name. The first time I looked at your employment papers, I thought it was a cute name; it left an impression on me. But when what showed up in the flesh was a man taller than myself, I had to take a quick second-look at what it was I thought I'd read."

He laughed to himself, as if recalling that time anew. Kaitani softly touched his smiling lips. "Why

don't you try calling me Anna?"

Fujiwara cracked open his eyes. "Calling you Anna is too out-of-character," he grumbled. "Yasukazu suits you fine."

He steadfastly refused to call him Anna.

Chapter 11

It was eight o'clock in the morning. Kaitani was drowsily snuggling next to Fujiwara's warm, sweet body when his cell phone rang. He answered the call, still only half-awake. The caller was an old teammate of his from college; Kaitani hadn't heard from him in ages. The story was, he was participating in a company baseball tournament, and at the last second, one of the team members had to leave on urgent business.

"I'm just asking you to come and lend a hand."

"Hey, I'll be there, I'll be there. You can count on it."

For obvious reasons, Cavi did not have a baseball team. Although Kaitani often went to the batting cages, he hadn't played in a tournament since graduation. He happily accepted the offer and hung up. "Yes!" he said, clenching his fists and punching the air. When he casually turned around, Fujiwara was sprawled on the sheets looking at him, having probably awakened while he was talking. He seemed a bit out-of-sorts, and he was wearing an expression like that of a sulking cat.

"That was a friend of mine from college. The baseball team he plays on is a man down, so he asked me to fill in."

"Baseball?" Fujiwara queried dubiously. "Now that you mention it, I seem to recall you saying something about living the sporting life while in college."

"That's right. I was a catcher."

"Ah, yes. The second-rate catcher for the team that in high school lost in the opening round three years in a row."

"I was never second-rate!" he shot back, taking the quip seriously. Fujiwara hugged his pillow and laughed cleverly. "But isn't that how you put it yourself?"

His carefree, smiling face was cute enough to die for. Kaitani drew closer to the man sprawled on the bed and planted a light kiss on his thin lips. "The game starts at one o'clock," he said, nuzzling Fujiwara's cheek with the tip of his nose like a friendly dog. Usually Fujiwara would return his Eskimo kisses, but this time he curtly turned his face away, obviously in something of a tiff.

"Let's go together," Kaitani beseeched him, grasping his right hand.

"What are you asking me for?" Fujiwara replied, a startled look on his face.

"Well, today's our day off after all. I was just thinking that—"

A scowl at once creased Fujiwara's pretty brows. "Not for me. I have things that need to get done."

"Eh? We've been spending Saturdays together for the last month."

Fujiwara shook his hand free of Kaitani's grip and turned his back to him. "You said you wanted to come over, so I was just keeping you company."

Just keeping you company, he said, but Fujiwara seemed to enjoy it as well. More recently, they would eat

dinner together, then go back to Fujiwara's apartment and make love. To be sure, Kaitani was the one who suggested the bubble bath, but Fujiwara was the one who enthusiastically said that he had purchased some bath salts.

Despite having pointedly turned his back on him, Kaitani clasped his arms around Fujiwara. "C'mon. Let's go together. Baseball is fun, even if you're just watching."

"I have no interest in baseball. I can never remember the rules."

"Even if you don't know the regulations, it's no big deal."

When he still refused to agree, Kaitani hung onto him and sat him down on the bed. "If an outsider like me showed up," Fujiwara said dubiously, "it will just be awkward."

"I'm an outsider, too. So, let's go together. If it becomes too much of a pain, you can take off whenever."

Fujiwara's beautiful countenance sank into silence. He looked at Kaitani with upturned eyes. "You plan on enjoying yourself whether I'm there or not?"

"Yeah, I suppose so—" Perhaps Fujiwara was bothered by the fact that even though he'd expressed no interest in baseball, Kaitani still insisted on him coming. But Kaitani really wanted Fujiwara to accompany him. "It's where I'm at my best," he said.

Fujiwara hung his head.

"Up till now, nothing else I've done makes me look half as good as when I'm playing baseball. Won't

you come and watch?"

Fujiwara gaped at him, and for several long moments appeared completely taken aback. Then he doubled over in laughter.

"H-Hey! Don't laugh!"

"Nothing else makes you look half as good—?"

"I'm a klutz at work, right? You're always getting pissed at me and stuff. But when I'm playing baseball, I really feel like I'm in my element—"

"I get it. I get it."

In the end, Fujiwara came along to lend moral support, and drove him to the playing field. It was a clear fall day, not a cloud in the skies—perfect baseball weather. When they arrived at the playing field, Kaitani melded right in with the team that his college friend belonged to. Even though they were businessmen, they all came to play for the love of the game. And without even knowing one another's names, they all spoke the same language.

Soon after, they launched into a grueling, four-hour doubleheader. Kaitani had two hits and one home run. As a last-minute substitution, he turned in a great performance. He was sure Fujiwara would have gotten bored and gone home, but he sat there in the car's shadow and watched until the game was over. After the tournament, the team asked Kaitani to go out for a drink with them, but he begged off, and returned with Fujiwara, who was still waiting for him.

"I supposed they wanted to you go drinking with them?"

"Yeah, but I turned them down."

"Doesn't seem like such a bad idea. I take it you haven't seen your friend in quite a long while."

"I'm still an outsider."

The truth was, he wanted to tag along, but his desire to return home with Fujiwara, who had waited the whole time, was stronger.

"The game was pretty boring, wasn't it?" he asked nervously. He'd really enjoyed himself, but looking at things from Fujiwara's perspective, he had been dragged off to a four-hour baseball tournament in which he had no interest. Halfway-through, Kaitani started to regret twisting his arm so forcefully.

Then Fujiwara said something that caught him completely off guard: "The game was more interesting than I expected. Even though it's a short step up from sandlot baseball, it wasn't that far removed from the real thing."

"You're right. There were guys there who'd played in the Koshien tourney and a few who even played pro ball, but in the minors."

"Impressive."

"I hit pretty well. Even though the pitcher had a strong arm, he was throwing 'light.' So when I connected, the ball really jumped off the bat."

"You hit a home run, too."

"Yeah, I looked good smashing that one out of the park, don't you think?"

"Oh, sure. You looked great! You looked great!" Fujiwara replied, treating him as an adult would an enthusiastic little kid.

Kaitani slumped down in the passenger's seat

and sulked.

"So," said Fujiwara, "are professional games that interesting as well?"

"They sure are. Let's go see a game sometime!"

"I suppose we should."

They arrived back at Fujiwara's building, still talking baseball. As soon as they got up to the apartment and Kaitani wrapped his arms around him, Fujiwara chuckled and slapped him on the back. "You smell like sweat and dirt."

Suddenly conscious of being looked at, Kaitani recalled making a particularly showy slide into base during the game.

"In other words, go take a shower," Fujiwara said, and chased him into the bathroom.

After washing himself and stepping out of the shower, he noticed a small bottle on the shelf above the sink in the dressing room. The logo on the bottle said "SHANGRI-LA." When he brought it up to his nose, he recognized the aroma as Fujiwara's unique scent. Wondering who made it, he examined the manufacturer's label. To his surprise, it was a Cavi product, the company they worked for. Yet Kaitani had never seen this brand of cologne before.

After drying off, he found Fujiwara on the living room sofa, reading the morning's paper. Fujiwara subscribed to three newspapers, and reading them cover to cover was part of his daily routine. He even read the newspaper in bed.

Still in his bathrobe, Kaitani sat down next to Fujiwara. The sofa creaked. "Is that cologne you use

a Cavi brand, Fujiwara-san? The one labeled SHANGRI-LA?"

"You saw the bottle in the bathroom?"

"Yeah. I didn't know Cavi made anything like it."

"That's because it went out of production a long time ago. That bottle is from the original run. I had the fragrance duplicated using the same compounds."

"Wow."

Kaitani brought the tip of his nose next to Fujiwara's neck. The odor of SHANGRI-LA mingled with the natural smell of his body, producing a remarkably sweet scent.

"Too bad, because it was a wonderful fragrance," Fujiwara mumbled to himself. He smiled thinly. "If you really like it, I'll share a little with you."

"Really? You don't mind?"

Kaitani followed him into the bedroom. Fujiwara opened the closet door, opened the top drawer of his organizer, and took out a silver rod thinner than a tube of lipstick. "It's an atomizer I thought of using it when I traveled. I refilled it but never got around to actually using it."

Fujiwara opened the lid of the atomizer, grasped Kaitani's wrist and misted it lightly with the cologne. Kaitani lifted his wrist to his nose and sniffed. "Great! It's your scent, all right."

Fujiwara answered with an amused smile.

"Really. It is."

"It's just that I thought SHANGRI-LA was more your style."

"Why would you think it would suit my sweaty smell?"

Fujiwara pursed his lips. "That's not what I mean," he said with a shrug. "It simply seemed to me that its refreshing notes agreed more with your outdoorsy character."

Fujiwara's brooding, downcast eyes were very sexy. An arousing shock ran through Kaitani's body, and he kissed his sulking partner. They fell onto the bed and, as usual, Fujiwara said, "Wait," twisting his body away from Kaitani's grasp. "I need to shower, too."

He tried to get off the bed, but Kaitani fell on his back and embraced him. "You're fine the way you are. Let's do it now," he whispered in his ear.

The body he was holding trembled. "But I'm all sweaty—"

"Your sweat doesn't smell, does it? Anyway, I like the way you smell, Fujiwara-san."

"But—" Fujiwara started to say, and Kaitani closed the pouting lips with a kiss. Like peeling a fruit, he stripped off his clothes. By the time he was standing before Kaitani completely naked, Fujiwara was half-erect as well. He'd apparently given up on the shower idea.

Kaitani put his hands on Fujiwara's knees and spread his legs far apart. When he was erect, Fujiwara's missing testicle became apparent. The missing half of this broken heart was both poignant and precious. What had once been nothing more than blackmail material had come to be adorable to Kaitani. When he played with his penis, with only the one ball tightened up. Fujiwara's

bashfulness was incredibly arousing.

Kaitani touched the inviting sphere with the tips of his fingers. Fujiwara yelped and jumped and closed his legs together. In a complete reversal of the sweet eroticism, Fujiwara glared down at him. "I told you not to touch the merchandise."

He meant his testicle. He didn't mind Kaitani kissing his cock or his ass, but he was hypersensitive when it came to his testicle and hated it even being gently nudged. When they'd started shacking up together, he'd let Kaitani know from the start that there was no touching him there.

"I was just going to fondle it."

"No doing that either."

"When it puckers up like that, it'll really feel good, I guarantee it."

"If you want to do something like that, then go fondle yourself! This is non-negotiable."

Kaitani wanted to touch it, but he had no stomach for the unpleasantness that would ensue if he persevered, so he gave in. After extracting a pledge not to touch him there again, Fujiwara permitted him to embrace his still-vigilant body. Having now calmed his lover, Kaitani started over with a kiss. The foreplay proceeded to penetration in the missionary position, with the two of them rocking violently back and forth. Fujiwara's genital yo-yoed against his pubic hair.

"It really is cute, Fujiwara-san, your merchandise," he whispered in the gasping, convulsing man's ear. "The color is pretty, and it is so cute when you jiggle it."

Fujiwara shook his head emphatically. "You're lying."

"I'm not lying."

"No, it's ugly." Tears welled up at the corners of his eyes. Fujiwara was lying on his back, so Kaitani pulled him into a sitting position. Perhaps because of the sudden change in position, Fujiwara drew his brows together and squeezed his eyes shut and clung to Kaitani tightly.

"Are you okay? Does it hurt? Sorry," he said, stroking his back. Plastered against him, Fujiwara shook his head. He looked so pitiful; Kaitani kissed his white neck as if to leave a hickey.

"No kidding, your equipment really is lovable, Fujiwara-san. It's round, and a nice color. There's nothing wrong with it at all."

"But—everybody laughs when they see it."

Everybody laughed him—but when? He'd explained how he'd been mercilessly teased in junior high and high school, so he must have been referring to another time in his life.

"Even if everybody says it's ugly, I think it's cute."

The head lying against his shoulder shuddered.

"Even if the whole world said it was ugly, I'd say it's not, so it must not be." Catlike, Kaitani rubbed his face against Fujiwara's. "You've always got me, who loves you. It's nothing to cry about now. The next person who tells you things are ugly down there—I'll bash his face in."

Fujiwara had nothing to say in reply. He said

nothing, but the strength with which he was holding Kaitani did measurably increase.

Chapter 12

While Kaitani camped out in the library to research the data Osada had requested, he also looked for more information about SHANGRI-LA. He couldn't help but be curious about a product Fujiwara liked enough to use after it was no longer produced.

SHANGRI-LA had gone on sale eight years before as part of the DANTE line of men's skin care products. Six months later, the cologne alone was pulled from the shelves. When CHAPS premiered three years after that, the entire DANTE line was canceled. In this business, where products came and went at a remarkable pace, half a year was quick. The general feeling was that the decision was based on less-than-impressive sales numbers.

When he asked Osada about it, she said that DANTE did indeed sell, but she wasn't even aware that the line included its own cologne.

On a Thursday toward the latter half of October, Kaitani invited Higashiyama to Kemuri, saying that he wanted to talk something over with him. They sat down across the table from each other. Kaitani took out the SHANGRI-LA atomizer he'd gotten from Fujiwara and had Higashiyama take a whiff

"So tell me, what do you think of that scent?"

Higashiyama tilted his head to one side. "Reminds me of the fragrance that the Section Chief Fujiwara uses."

"So it is. But forget about Fujiwara-san for the time being. What's your objective opinion?"

Higashiyama folded his arms and grunted. "Physiologically speaking, I'd say it has an oriental flavor to it. For a men's product, I think it's a pretty sweet smell."

"Do you think it would sell?"

Higashiyama noticeably blinked.

"It's called SHANGRI-LA. It was sold as a part of a Cavi skin care line for men, but was discontinued after six months. For such a great scent, it seems an awful waste, doesn't it? I was thinking that we ought to try bringing it to market again."

Higashiyama refolded his arms and sunk into silence, a strained look on his face.

"When it comes to a fragrance like this, with the brand image already out there, it'd be tough. Cavi's cosmetics division is top-ranked in Japan, but men's colognes don't have a very big share. Compared with branded foreign imports, I hate to say it, but the Cavi name leaves a rather mass-market impression."

Kaitani's own research into the market had led him to the same conclusion.

"This product was brought to market already and discontinued. It's a cancelled program. Frankly speaking, to put it on sale again would be reckless."

"Yes, but—" Kaitani objected. "With cosmetics, the contents and technology keep advancing every day, but a perfume like this pretty much stays the same. You have your legacy brands that keep on selling year after year. That why it's worth giving them a new lease on life

now and then. I have the feeling the reason it didn't sell when it did was simply that it wasn't the right time." He clenched his fists, as if to lend emphasis to the argument. "Men's fashions are pretty casual these days, but don't you think the classic look will be soon coming back into style? And by classic, I'm talking about a more stoic look. People associate the stoic with a harsh, manly scent. This sweeter aroma, though, is something quite different, something more upbeat and contemporary."

"Perhaps," Higashiyama muttered. "With the home market for men's fragrances that's nearly nonexistent, there's a lot of room for growth and exploration. But nobody wants to make the first move because they're all convinced there's such a steep grade to climb. The market's small, and establishing a brand image is hard. When it comes to something like this, Section Chief Fujiwara's the one with the detailed knowledge, not me. You should be running it by him."

Kaitani averted his gaze and looked down. "You're right, but this time around I want to work out the details as much as I can by myself. Although I participated in the planning for KASHA, the word from the beginning was that it was CHAPS with a few modifications. It's not something I came up with myself, is it? Next time around, I'm thinking I want to do something where I can stick out my chest and say that it's all mine."

Recently, he'd decided he wanted to make his own plans and lay down his own ground rules, and not just do the tasks that somebody else gave him. He wanted to be the one who created the job description in

the first place. And he wanted to show Fujiwara that he could carry his own water and get things done on his own accord.

Since he and Fujiwara had become intimate, he'd really taken off: Fujiwara did his homework. Whenever he had time, he was reading a book or a newspaper, and he never missed the nightly news. He even perused the women's magazines. He was a one-man information-gathering organization. And he never let up when it came to his own hygiene and appearance.

Aside from his missing testicle and his overarching pride, he was the ideal man, the perfect man. When he and Kaitani were in bed together, Fujiwara was his beautiful and sexy lover, as well as being erotic beyond all reason. But if Kaitani took a step away and looked back, he could feel the distance between them.

Even after telling himself that comparing himself to Fujiwara was a mistake, he wanted to shrink that distance. He wasn't going to be his equal any time soon, but he at least wanted to follow close behind. That's why he wanted to set his own agenda, create a hit of his own, and demonstrate his own accomplishments.

In any case, the first step would be submitting a business plan. Because he wanted it to be a surprise, he needed to proceed on his own, without a helping hand from Fujiwara until the thing fully took form.

Higashiyama was telling him it wouldn't be easy—not by a long shot—but there was no way Kaitani was going to give up. Starting the next day, while helping Osada on her anti-aging project, he took his investigation of the market conditions for men's cologne

a step further.

No doubt about it, domestic production of men's fragrances was practically nil. Of the brand names Kaitani recognized, all were foreign imports. On top of that, there were surprisingly few users of such products in Japan. However, there were also cases of a brand developing a following and enjoying a sustained market presence.

Kaitani hadn't taken a liking to Fujiwara's cologne at first. Still, recently, he'd lost his dislike of men's perfumes. Indeed, he'd come to see them as quite sexy. When he embraced Fujiwara and his sweet scent drifted up, it set his heart pounding. If this was the case for somebody like him, who until now hadn't had any interest in the subject, he had the feeling that if he were a woman sensitive to perfume, he would have fallen for Fujiwara in one fell swoop.

It having come to the attention of Fujiwara and then himself, he wanted to resurrect the product line and bring it to market. With this conviction firmly in mind, he put together one sales strategy after another. Examining the conditions in which the cologne was previously launched along with the accompanying sales figures, he couldn't help but face the hard realities that marketing a product involved.

No matter what, he wanted to make SHANGRI-LA a true success. Whenever he had a spare minute, it was all he thought about: how to make it a winner.

"Hey, Kaitani."

When Osada called out to him, he'd been collating anti-aging materials and compiling the data.

He was also lost in thought brainstorming sales strategies for SHANGRI-LA.

"Come up with any good ideas for promotional tchotchkes to ship with KASHA products?" she asked.

The subject had completely slipped his mind. "Um—" he stammered. "Well, I—"

Getting the hint, Osada was clearly disappointed. "What's going on? I was expecting—"

"I'll look into it right away."

"Oh, forget about it."

With an air of resignation, Osada returned to her own desk. She'd discussed the matter with him and he hadn't followed up. His fault. He stopped what he was doing, brought up his browser, and started Googling the kind of things that guys were into. Guy stuff, male-oriented hobbies, tastes, and preferences. He got all kinds of hits. Men who were into snakes and reptiles, men who into trains, men who into high-end video and porn. He found himself stopping on the keyword: "military."

Come to think about it, when he was in college, he knew a guy who was a real gun nut. True, he was a bit off his rocker, but the model guns he made were pretty cool. Browsing around for military-era items, he came across the home page for a store that sold uniforms and replica firearms.

Considering the possibilities of a scale model gun or something like a figurine, he clicked through to the catalog page. There he found a listing for silver dog tags. Simple and quite eye-catching. The product description claimed that they were identical to those used by real soldiers.

A promo item based on dog tags. That would work! Fixated on the screen, Kaitani's eyes glittered. Dog tags engraved with the dragon design, with a kanji on the back. He never heard of using ornamental dogs tags as tchotchkes before. As it was fairly big-ticket item, he had to think it'd be a hit with the average apprehensive otaku as well.

Kaitani imagined Fujiwara wearing the dog tags. The impression he got from a man wearing dog tags with more or less the ripped and brawny type, but he didn't see them clashing with Fujiwara. He could picture them glittering on his chest. And when he brought his face closer, the scent of SHANGRI-LA, a touch of the oriental—

A wonderful idea blossomed in his brain. This would work, no doubt about it. Sitting at his computer, Kaitani clenched his fists with determination.

Chapter 13

Sunday morning, the first week of November, Kaitani let his lover sleep in late while he showered. He returned to the room naked, and opened the closet. Toward the end of the week, Fujiwara had created some space on the right-hand side of the closet for when Kaitani stayed over.

Retrieving a pair of underwear from the drawer in the closet organizer set aside for his use, he noticed a paper bag next to the rattan basket he hadn't seen before. The name of a sports outfitter was printed on the bag. When he peeked into the bag, he glimpsed a faint tan color and caught a whiff of familiar odor.

Kaitani stealthily opened the bag and examined the contents. In the bag were two baseball gloves and a ball. The two gloves still had the tags attached. The unique smell of brand-new leather rose to his nose. Just for a minute, he thought, and tried on the glove. It perfectly fit his hand.

With only his shorts on, Kaitani jumped onto the bed. The undulations in the mattress caused his lover to awaken with a start. "Hey," said Kaitani, whispering in his ear, "what's with the ball and glove in the closet?"

Fujiwara stretched and yawned and rubbed his eyes. "I bought it for my cousin's kid, but he said he didn't want it."

"But two gloves?"

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"For his brother as well."

Kaitani wrapped his arms around him. "How old are his kids?"

"Elementary school."

"Yeah, that wouldn't work. Those gloves are too big. Bigger is not better in this case. The glove should fit the hand, well, like a glove. For a kid, you need to get a smaller glove."

"I see," said Fujiwara, in a somewhat nonchalant manner.

"Since you can't use the glove as originally intended, how about you and me go play some catch? It's good exercise."

Fujiwara looked at him with sleepy, upturned eyes. "I have never played baseball."

Kaitani clapped him on the chest. "Nothing wrong with that! I'll teach you. There's a park nearby. We can go practice there."

He dragged Fujiwara off to the park. As might be expected from somebody who had never played the game, he couldn't even reach Kaitani with the ball, but when Kaitani taught him the proper form he caught on fast, and after throwing a bunch settled into the proper groove.

They worked up a good sweat and got back to the apartment around two. After a quick shower, they had a late lunch at a nearby café. It was past four. Kaitani was sitting on the big couch in the living room watching a videotape of a variety show. Fujiwara nodded off and slumped against Kaitani's thighs. The newspaper he'd been reading parachuted to the floor.

Kaitani affectionately stroked the hair of the dozing man reclining against him. They'd tossed the ball around a lot, and he was probably all worn out. Learning to throw the ball, Fujiwara had become as focused as a child and certainly appeared to enjoy himself. Kaitani was happy that he'd been there to teach him.

Fujiwara had bought a quality glove to give to his relatives. The leather was pliant and light, just what a man who cared about superior merchandise would choose. Still, giving a child an adult-sized glove was a bit of a slip-up. As Kaitani mulled this over, something occurred to him. No matter what he did, Fujiwara researched the hell out of it. Yet he'd gone ahead and purchased an adult-sized glove that was way too big for any child to use. Wouldn't he have also determined exactly what kind of glove was best for a child?

Or had he gone ahead and bought an adult glove that he intended for himself all along? A bag with a glove turning up in the closet next to Kaitani's organizer—and Fujiwara not bothering to say anything about it—was more than a bit suspicious. He'd probably wanted to play catch with him all along. He could have just gone ahead and said, "Let's do it!" Strange that he'd never brought it up. He was very "proactive" when it came to sex. That he wouldn't be forthright about something like this, but would resort to such sneaky methods was crazy but cute. Really cute.

Fujiwara stiffly drew his brows together as Kaitani hugged his exhausted body. Kaitani sat him up and dragged him into his lap. He raked his fingers through Fujiwara's thin, soft hair and asked, "How did

you find out what size glove I wore?"

Hovering just above him, Fujiwara's white face suddenly blushed.

"You wouldn't have bought the glove not knowing. What, did you measure my hand while I was sleeping?"

"How did you know?!"

He hadn't known, but he laughed to himself, pretending he did. Fujiwara reddened to the tips of his ears. Kaitani said, "If you wanted to play catch, you could have just said so. You didn't need to go about it in such a roundabout way."

Fujiwara hung his head and sank into silence.

"I'll go to the park with you any time you want to play ball, even in the middle of the night."

"Sorry," he said in a small, apologetic voice. "It's not easy asking you such things."

Kaitani kissed his faltering lips. Perhaps because Fujiwara was always so aggressive, this awkwardness left him more subdued than usual.

"Take off your pants," Kaitani whispered in his ear.

"Eh?" Fujiwara responded.

"Your underpants as well."

The pink that had been fading from his cheeks now returned in a rush.

"It's your punishment for fibbing to me. Strip down and show me your cute equipment. I'm not going to fold, fondle, or even touch it. Just watch."

He kissed him as he spoke, alternating between teasing and cajoling him. Crouched on his lap, Fujiwara

hesitated for a long time and then finally planted his feet on the floor. As Kaitani watched, he bit his lip and put his hands on his belt.

Chapter 14

The sales promotion and merchandising meeting for the KASHA launch was three days away, and Kaitani decided it was time to present the special plan he'd be slaving over to Fujiwara. Making note of how occupied Fujiwara was with work, a little after three o'clock he took advantage of a moment when Fujiwara's hands were apparently unoccupied and approached his lover, who was wearing that laid-back look of ennui of his face.

"I put a proposal together about the promotional tchotchkes for the KASHA rollout. I'd like you to take a look at it."

He held out the folder. "I see," Fujiwara said, accepting it with a somewhat surprised expression on his face. Clearly curious, he opened the folder and took a look.

This was the first business proposal Kaitani had developed on his own. He was confident he'd honed it to perfection. "It's a pretty good idea, don't you think? This is something we could implement right away."

Expecting to be on the receiving end of effusive praise, he awaited Fujiwara's response. What kind of opinions his boss might be forming weighed on his mind; he couldn't concentrate on other tasks. Mistaking his idleness to mean he had time on his hands, Osada gave him another assignment, and in sorting out data, the

next hour passed in a flash. He'd finally come to a place where he could take a break when Fujiwara called him over.

Hope filling his chest, he approached the Section Chief's desk. The expression on Fujiwara's face when he looked up at was rather severe. "There's nothing wrong per se with this business plan. I think the dog tag idea is a good one. But I can't agree to the use of this cologne."

"Why's that?"

This was a fragrance he'd liked so much that he'd gone so far as to commission a replica and continued to use it. Kaitani hadn't imagined anything other than approval for his plan to resurrect this fragrance that, once upon a time, had met an unfortunate, early death.

"It seems you're thinking of packaging the item with a sample of the SHANGRI-LA cologne. However, this cologne was discontinued six months after its debut because it didn't sell. Promoting a new product with such tchotchkes would only detract from its image. It would certainly not help sell it." There was a hard edge to his voice. But he didn't appear angry. "SHANGRI-LA has an oriental aura about it that doesn't agree with the KASHA line. On top of that, SHANGRI-LA debuted eight years ago. I doubt anybody remembers it now." Fujiwara pressed the tips of his fingers against his brow. "I don't understand your aim in pushing this, knowing it was a discontinued product."

"I really like SHANGRI-LA. That's why I—"

"Even though you like it, the world didn't agree. Short of confirming your opinions, you remain in the minority." Fujiwara handed the business plan back

to Kaitani. "The SHANGRI-LA part is a non-starter, but bundling with a cologne sample is a novel idea. For your first business plan, you did a good job. Men's fragrances have become an undeveloped domestic market niche. By distributing samples, we could collect data on the cologne preferences of male consumers. Even if we assigned R&D the task of developing a new fragrance now, the time isn't there and it's likely they'd pass."

"No, not another fragrance; I want to go forward with SHANGRI-LA," Kaitani pointed out, a bit miffed to find the conversation going off on this tangent.

Fujiwara's countenance only hardened. "I told you, there's no way. No matter how you frame it, that's a proposal I'll have to reject."

Kaitani slammed his hands down on the desk and leaned forward. "SHANGRI-LA is an in-house product, so there would be no need to undergo a whole new R&D effort. Even if we don't have much time, it's a viable proposition. That's why I'm pushing it. I want to explore the possibilities. Isn't the reason it didn't sell before was because the time wasn't right?"

Fujiwara drew his brows together. He sat back in his chair, bowed his head, and sighed. "I don't know what you've found out about the costs of a discontinued product, but I consider it an absolute failure."

If he thought it was a total flop, then why did he keep on using it? Because he really liked it. Kaitani swallowed the words that rose in his throat. "Do you consider SHANGRI-LA a failure because it didn't sell well?"

"Indeed."

"So, if a topnotch product doesn't sell, it's still a failure?"

Fujiwara closed his eyes and chose his words carefully. "I'm hearing what you're saying, but on what bases have you decided whether or not it is a good product?"

"That's—" Good based on quantity? Quality? They all mingled together. He couldn't come up with an answer on the spur of the moment.

Fujiwara lifted his head and looked right at him. "The customer's purchasing decisions decide the difference between a good product and a bad one. A product that's not accepted in the market has no value."

Clenching his business plan, Kaitani returned to his desk. Still ticked off, he chucked the crumpled document into the trash. The junior staffers looked at him with startled faces, but he ignored them. He thought he'd come up with a good idea. He thought Fujiwara would be pleased with what he'd done. It hadn't happened, and now he felt so down he couldn't stand it.

Chapter 15

The sales promotion and merchandising meeting started at two o'clock. Kaitani was fifteen minutes late and caught a harsh look from Osada. Fujiwara was in-attendance, and while he surely would have noticed his tardy arrival, he cast him only a fleeting glance and said nothing.

In fact, yesterday had been the day Kaitani usually slept over. He would make inquiries by email to the effect that if Fujiwara had no official entertaining to do and no pressing business at hand, they could go out to eat and then head back to Fujiwara's place. That'd been the pattern for the last month.

For three days, since the quarrel over the business plan, Kaitani hadn't contacted Fujiwara by email or telephone. He was still upset, and if they did get together, he had the feeling they'd spend their private time arguing about work. He'd gone so far as to draw himself a line in the sand, keeping business and pleasure separate.

The KASHA team members from the Sales Promotion & Planning department pitched their tchotchke ideas. Kaitani had already seen the materials being handed out. They included bundling an oriental-style cell phone strap, a cell phone cleaner, samples from other products in the KASHA line, and the like. Nothing very original.

"If this constitutes all the proposals—"

"Excuse me," said Kaitani, interrupting him. "I've been working on a promotional tchotchke as well that I'd like to present. I had the Section Chief look at it the other day, but I'd like to get opinions from the rest of you as well."

As expected, when he glanced at Fujiwara, a vein was throbbing on his forehead. Fujiwara said, "I thought I turned that proposal down." His voice was curt and low.

"Yes, in fact, the Section Chief did not have a high opinion of the proposal. However, I'd like to know what the team as a whole thinks about it. It may serve as food for thought as well."

"More opinions won't—"

Osada said, as he started to speak, "I think it'd at least be worth taking a look at. This meeting is about pitching ideas. Listening to Kaitani-kun's idea won't take that much time."

A lifeboat arrived from an unexpected quarter. Osada had spoken with enough determination that there was no turning her down. With no choice but to yield the floor, the sullen Fujiwara ignored him while Kaitani distributed the materials he'd prepared to the rest of the team.

"Um—I don't think you can really get the flavor of what I'm talking about just from the documentation. So I had a sample made."

From a paper bag he'd brought along, Kaitani produced the reason for his late arrival. He'd asked Shiozawa to do the design on the dog tags, and Shiozawa

hooked him up with someone who could do a one-off. It was a fairly thick metal pendant measuring four by two centimeters. The KASHA dragon motif decorated one side, and a Chinese character was engraved on the other. A transparent film was affixed to the dragon side.

"I was thinking of bundling this with the three main products in the skin care line. The film attached to the one side can be peeled off, revealing the fragrance of a cologne product. It's a product that was once manufactured by this company, but has since been discontinued."

Everybody—excepting Fujiwara—passed the pendant around the table, handling them as if they'd never seen anything like them before. "As for the characters engraved on the back of the dog tags, we can make them in five variations."

Osada picked up the dog tags and toyed with them. "These are really cute," she said, mostly to herself. "The chain is short enough that it could be used as a cell phone strap or as a key ring. Hey, can I pull off this film here?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

Osada peeled off the film and sniffed the scent. "Ah," she said in a small voice. She must have recognized it as Fujiwara's cologne, but said nothing more.

Another female employee said, picking up the prototype, "It has a sweet, somewhat oriental flavor. It almost doesn't seem like a men's product."

A fragrance like this subtly changed its nature according to the person's own body odor. Only Osada

had recognized it as the cologne that Fujiwara used.

"I really like this fragrance. But for my boyfriend—?"

Lively, unforgiving opinions started to fly back and forth.

"I feel good about it even without the perfume; the dog tags are nice. When you say there will be five different kinds of kanji on the reverse, there'll probably be collectors who will want the whole set."

He'd thought of producing multiple designs with collectors in mind. But he couldn't ignore the opinion that it'd be fine without the perfume.

"Um, when you say it'd be fine without the perfume, what specifically do you mean?" he asked her.

"It's a nice fragrance, but I have the feeling that you'll end up with men who love it and men who hate it. In that case, it might be better to be safe than sorry. However, being able to pull off a sticker and find a scent underneath is, to put it simply, rather fun."

Fujiwara didn't participate in the discussions, but looked on as an observer. Having brought a variety of opinions to the table, Osada wrapped things up. "Of the ideas presented so far, I personally find the dog tag proposal by Kaitani-kun the most compelling. However, I also believe this matter of the fragrance requires further study. What do you think, Section Chief Fujiwara?"

Having kept his silence so far, he opened his mouth and spoke slowly. "I concur with your opinion. Kaitani-kun's idea of bundling the dog tags is a good one, but there is no need to include the fragrance as well."

"But I think the fragrance really works—"

When Kaitani started to object, Osada nodded her head. "Yes, engraving the pendants with Chinese characters is a good idea, and if we get the nod, it's what I'd like to do. However, I think this matter of the fragrance is going to become a sticking point. It'd strike me as a disappointing waste if the pendant attracted a lot of interest, but the fragrance turned people off."

The meeting lasted a few minutes shy of two hours. Kaitani had proposed the dog tags with the affixed scent strip in order to revive interest in SHANGRI-LA, and was shocked when the overwhelming opinion was that the fragrance wasn't really necessary. About the time he was leaving the conference room along with everybody else, the man who'd ignored him until now called his name.

"We need to talk," he said, motioning for Kaitani to remain behind. "So, have you learned your lesson?"

His back facing the window, Fujiwara had an expression of his face like that of a teacher admonishing a delinquent student.

"What lesson?"

Fujiwara wouldn't meet his gaze. He answered, looking off to the side, "Considering the evaluations SHANGRI-LA received after all your evangelizing, I guess you've learned the hard way, no?"

Nothing rankled Kaitani like having what he already knew pointed out to him. He ground his back teeth.

"Still, this was a pretty small sample of opinions, wasn't it? There was a girl who said she liked

the scent."

"No matter how much she liked it, one person in a group of ten means nothing. And no matter how much women like it, KASHA's targeted audience is men. The percentage of men would likely be even smaller."

"But—"

When he started to object, Fujiwara slowly moved toward him. "SHANGRI-LA aside, the dog tag idea is a good one, and will be popular with male consumers. This was mentioned already, but what about using the pendant alone?" All at once, his tone of voice softened. "If you can agree to the pendant alone, then I can probably get approval for your proposal. I'll take it to my superiors today. It's rare for such a proposal to be accepted in its first draft, but you've got beginner's luck on your side."

"But, obviously, I want SHANGRI-LA to—" Kaitani started to say, dragging his feet toward any possible agreement.

"Give me a break!" Fujiwara angrily retorted, and Kaitani sunk into silence. "Not everything is always going to go your way. SHANGRI-LA is the deal-breaker. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Kaitani averted his eyes from the angry man's steely gaze and bowed his head. "I did a lot of research, and I don't think including a sample of SHANGRI-LA with KASHA will affect sales one way or the other."

"Don't you think it better if that wasn't the case?"

"Quite the opposite, I was thinking that KASHA sales could give a boost to SHANGRI-LA. I'd like KASHA

users to test-drive SHANGRI-LA, so to speak. Until we can get our hands on more concrete results, I can't go along with your proposition."

Fujiwara pressed his hands against his forehead and sighed. "Why are you making such a big deal out of SHANGRI-LA?"

Because Fujiwara liked it and used it, and because discontinuing the product was such a tragedy. There was one other big reason. While learning from his mistakes and doing whatever it took to bring it to market, Kaitani had come to empathize with what was now a purely hypothetical product. Branded "bad" because it didn't sell well, SHANGRI-LA reminded Kaitani of himself.

Given another chance, if it only had the chance, it would probably sell. If he could get it into the hands of more people, the results would be different this time. Kaitani had come to embrace SHANGRI-LA with these hopes in mind. He said, "Because I've really developed a liking for SHANGRI-LA."

Fujiwara slammed his hand down on the conference table, an irritated expression clouding his face. The sound echoed off the walls of the room. "Affixing scent to the pendant is a novel idea. Once you set your mind to something, there's nothing you can't do. This time around, raising sales targets isn't the immediate goal of the sales promotion tchotchkes, so we can proceed without undue fear of failure."

For some reason, Fujiwara was passionately articulating his position in the debate.

"Even with no purpose other than gathering



data, there'd be no problem with shipping the pendants with a scent sticker."

"That being the case, then—" Let's do it! Kaitani was about to say, when Fujiwara cut him off.

"If you're going to persist solely on the subjective opinion that you like it, then let me have my say." He glared at Kaitani. "I have absolutely no intent of using SHANGRI-LA as a sales promotion tchotchke for the KASHA line." When he snarled "absolutely," the extent of his resolution on the matter was clear.

"Why is it such a bad idea? The product was discontinued and yet you liked it enough to have it replicated so you could keep on using it!"

"And that's why I won't be using it!" he spit out.

"That's why?" Kaitani was about to reply, but Fujiwara had more to say.

"Eight years ago, I participated in the planning of the DANTE men's skin care line that included SHANGRI-LA. For men's cologne, SHANGRI-LA had a particularly aromatic scent, and many believed there was not that much different between it and a woman's perfume. I'd taken a liking to SHANGRI-LA. Convinced it would sell, I campaigned hard for it with my superiors. Despite being a new employee and the only man on the team, they followed my advice, and SHANGRI-LA was added to the line. In the end, DANTE sales were satisfactory, but SHANGRI-LA was discontinued after six months, and the existing stock was sold off to discount outlets."

Fujiwara roughly swept back his bangs from his forehead.

"I don't keep on using SHANGRI-LA because I have a particular liking for it. I wear the fragrance as a personal rebuke. I'm not going to make such a mistake again."

Kaitani hadn't known that the "perfect" Fujiwara had experienced failure before in his career. He well-understood how mortifying it must have been, but he simply couldn't take Fujiwara's words at face value. No matter what he did in order to discipline himself, would he really go so far as to copy a product that was taken off the shelves eight years ago, and continue to use it? While claiming it was a failure, he probably had never personally recognized it as such. Was its failure to sell just too painful a burden to face?

"When the planning for a new men's skin care line—KASHA—was entrusted to me, I promised myself I wouldn't make that same mistake again. Consequently, I'm aware of my reluctance to do anything other than what is necessary to get the product on the shelves. You're arm-twisting ways got a new product type introduced, and that I don't regret. But SHANGRI-LA is where I draw the line. I have no intention of revisiting my past failures and exposing them to all the word."

Kaitani clenched both his hands. "Why not pursue it as your personal vindication, then?"

Fujiwara furrowed his brow, looking as if he'd just tasted something painfully sour.

"Sure, it was a non-starter eight years ago. But it may work out fine this time around. There may be many more people like me who really like the fragrance, don't you think?"

"No! How many times do I have to tell you to make you happy? As a rule, there's nothing wrong with wanting things your own way, but you utterly lack the ability to adapt. It's time you listened, for a change, to what your superiors have to say." Fujiwara pressed his hands against his forehead and sighed. "Know when to take stock of a situation and back down."

Kaitani was mad enough to raise the hairs on his back. The more he listened to Fujiwara's monologue, the more he wanted to stick with SHANGRI-LA, largely because while he was telling him to "Give up," Fujiwara himself was so obviously hung up on it.

He had looked him in the eyes and called SHANGRI-LA a sales disaster, but he really liked it. That's why its failure to sell cut him to the core. All that remained of SHANGRI-LA was that sense of failure, and if he kept his current attitude, those feelings would only persist. This time around, even if they did bundle SHANGRI-LA with KASHA, it still might be received poorly. But doing nothing wouldn't change the current state of affairs, either.

You've got to get over yourself, Fujiwara-san. Look at things objectively, and don't take things so seriously—"

With a big sigh that sounded awfully forced, Fujiwara turned his back on Kaitani. "When I bare my soul to you, can't you even stop to listen? If not, continuing this conversation is a waste of time."

"Wait a minute! We still haven't resolved this—"

Fujiwara stopped in the doorway and looked back over his shoulder. "When I'm with you, I feel like

I'm with a spoiled, self-centered woman. It really is quite unpleasant."

Kaitani couldn't help but think of all the women Fujiwara had dated before. Fujiwara was comparing him to them, and it ticked him off. "What are you talking about? Isn't the woman you're describing yourself?"

For a moment, Fujiwara countenance took on a demon's visage. The veins stood out on his forehead, and his mouth tightened into a quivering, thin line. He shot Kaitani a look as if to damn him to hell and then left the room, slamming the door behind him.

He'd said with his actions what he didn't have to in words. No matter what the regrets, what was done was done.

Chapter 16

Fujiwara was usually so responsive that after sending an email, Kaitani could expect a reply within five minutes—thirty minutes at the most—yet he'd heard nothing after three days. Kaitani once tried calling him during work, but Fujiwara killed the ring tone as soon as he picked up the cell phone and switched it to silent mode.

Even when Kaitani said hello to him, Fujiwara would reply using the least possible amount of speech. If Kaitani attempted casual conversation, he would curtly ignore him. So completely did Fujiwara shun him that Kaitani was left without a next-move. Any apologies or excuses he tried to offer fell on deaf ears.

Thinking that he simply needed to get away from other people's prying eyes at work, he waited in ambush in front of Fujiwara's apartment building until the last train, but never saw him. That last outburst of his was uncalled for. He knew that, and that's why he wanted to say that he was sorry. But in wanting to apologize and not being able to, Kaitani could only pull his hair out in frustration.

Unable to exploit even the slightest opening in Fujiwara's armor, Kaitani sought out Higashiyama's help. They sat at a table in that curious tavern, Kemuri, their favorite dive, and Kaitani spun out the details of his blowup with Fujiwara. Higashiyama listened

without comment, and when he was done simply opened his mouth and said, cutting to the chase, "You were wrong."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

Higashiyama heaved a big sigh. "This kind of problem always has to be treated very delicately. No matter how often your partner is on the bottom, that doesn't mean he thinks of himself in female terms. To make matters worse, Section Chief Fujiwara is older and is your superior. Even if a man in that position can set aside his own pride, you need to think things through a lot more carefully when it comes to loving him."

No words were forthcoming. Kaitani could only nod his head.

"It may seem to Section Chief Fujiwara that a man he thought he trusted was only using him as a substitute woman."

"No way! I was just giving as good as I got. The last thing I meant to suggest was that he was a substitute woman. I mean, there's nobody on earth who could substitute for Fujiwara-san."

He fell in love with Fujiwara because he was Fujiwara. What made him so attractive was precisely that he was so fastidious, high-maintenance, fashion-conscious, obstinate, and so capable, and there wasn't anybody else like him.

"But that's the only meaning you could take from a statement like that."

Kaitani again sunk into silence. "That wasn't my intent. It's just that, at that moment, I was so pissed off—"

As things stood, if the two of them couldn't bury the hatchet, they'd probably split up. To be cast aside—the moment the possibility occurred to him, he felt as if he was going to have a heart attack. If that's what it came down to, then good riddance to SHANGRI-LA. Fujiwara had tried to mollify him, and if Kaitani hadn't instead made such a big deal about everything, this quarrel wouldn't have happened.

"But what's the next course of action now? I don't want to end this relationship. No way, no how."

Simply speaking the words brought tears to his eyes. Higashiyama folded his arms and appeared to be deeply mulling over the matter. "Has he changed his phone number? Has the server started bouncing your emails?"

"No, it hasn't."

"So, there's still hope," Higashiyama muttered. "If he was really over you, so much so that he wanted to break it off for good, he wouldn't want to get an email or phone call from you. He'd cut off communications. I know that's what I'd do. If he hasn't gone that far, then it's possible that he isn't ready yet to end it."

Higashiyama's reassurances were like an oasis glimpsed in the desert. "Y-You really think so?"

"All I can do is speculate. However, perhaps Section Chief Fujiwara is only waiting for you to reflect sufficiently on everything before apologizing."

"If self-reflection is what he's waiting for, then I've done it a million times-over already. No matter how much I apologize, he won't speak to me."

"Saying you've reflected on what you've done

won't necessarily communicate that fact to him. Seeing is believing. You've got to express yourself in a manner that demonstrates your sincerity."

A manner that demonstrates my sincerity... Nothing came to mind. A wine he liked? A name-brand accessory that he had a fondness for? But it seemed to him that such things wouldn't advance his cause in the right direction.

"So, how do I demonstrate my sincerity?"

Higashiyama shrugged and sighed. "Can't you think of anything on your own?"

Kaitani returned to his apartment and sat down in the middle of the room and thought for a long time. Sincerity, sincerity. Demonstrating my sincerity... He had no other alternative but to communicate what was in his heart. Having come to that conclusion, Kaitani slowly got to his feet. He ran to an all-night convenience store and bought stationery and an envelope.

He wrote down his feelings, telling Fujiwara how he really felt. It was like email, conveying words in written form, but writing them down character-by-character was different. The weight of the words was completely altered.

Rewriting and rewriting, he couldn't shake the feeling he wasn't expressing himself correctly. About the time he'd written a satisfactory letter, the night sky was brightening.

The next day, Kaitani left for work forty minutes earlier than usual and left his heartfelt letter on the Section Chief's desk. As he always did, Fujiwara arrived thirty minutes before the start of the workday

and noticed the letter at once. He turned the envelope over in his hands. For fear of doing more harm than good, Kaitani had only written Fujiwara's name on the envelope. Tilting his head and looking at this envelope with no return address, Fujiwara opened it with a pair of scissors and took out the letter.

Just as Kaitani was sure Fujiwara was going to read the letter, Osada pulled Kaitani away.

A conference was scheduled for the next day with R&D about the new anti-aging line, but R&D wanted to move it up to today, the sooner the better. Osada and Kaitani skipped the regular morning meeting and left for the R&D building. Their discussion with the R&D rep stretched on longer than expected, running past noon. After eating a late lunch and returning to the home office, it was around two o'clock.

Fujiwara wasn't in. Kaitani glanced at the status board and saw that he was attending a conference at a nearby hotel, and would be attending a reception afterward. Kaitani got the sense he wouldn't be returning to the office but would go straight home.

Kaitani wanted to know how he reacted to the letter, but at this point, he balked at asking Fujiwara to tell him. If the letter struck a chord in Fujiwara's heart, he would surely say so. Believing that, he waited for Fujiwara's to make to first move.

After leaving work, Kaitani went to a family restaurant he hadn't been to by himself in quite a long while. He had previously frequented taverns, gyudon shops, and family restaurants when alone, but since hooking up with Fujiwara, such visits had fallen off

markedly. He ordered his favorite—the hamburger special—and though it tasted the same as before, he found eating alone unbearably wearisome.

He couldn't help thinking about if Fujiwara was sitting across from him. But Fujiwara had no appetite for "family restaurants" or fast food joints, and ultimately, when he wasn't famished, he didn't feel he could ask him out. Imagining Fujiwara fastidiously chomping down on a hamburger, a foul expression on his face, Kaitani had to smile.

"Kaitani-kun."

Lost in his own daydreams, Kaitani wasn't even aware of the person standing there until she called out his name. Awkwardly turning to face her, the happy grin he encountered was that of the woman he hadn't contacted since the day they'd argued over the telephone. It was Sasaguri.

"Long time, no see."

As Sasaguri was the receptionist at Cavi; he saw her every day. But he only waved to her or said hello. Two weeks or so ago, she'd cut her long hair very short, slightly changing her appearance.

"Are you waiting for somebody?"

Kaitani shook his head. "I'm here by myself. And you?"

"The same. I just came in."

They were both on their own. Moreover, Sasaguri had made the point of talking to him. Entertaining the notion that they could eat together, he said, "You want to?" and indicated the seat across from him.

"Is it okay?"

"I was just thinking that it'd be nice to have somebody to talk to."

"Excuse me," Sasaguri said, taking the seat. Her style of dress seemed to have changed along with her shorter hair. The woman facing him now struck him as far more aggressive.

"You haven't been late to work recently, Kaitani-kun."

He glanced at his watch. Musing to himself that at this hour, Fujiwara would still be smack in the middle of the reception, he missed what she said. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I was saying how you weren't late to work any more. Before, you were always flying in at the last minute. Recently, though, I don't see your face anymore, so you must be getting to work before eight."

"That's probably the case."

Sasaguri giggled. "Can I tell you something? You've gotten handsomer as of late. You've even gained something of a following among the girls in reception."

"Eh? Oh, I'm not good-looking."

Before now, people had said things like "You just can't do your job" and "You haven't got it all going upstairs" straight to his face. But nobody had ever called him "handsome."

"The truth is...I've noticed that you've changed as well, Kaitani-kun. Your face and hair look the same, but you somehow seem more calm and collected. You must be doing well at your job. I think that's because you've gotten more confident, and it shows."

Though such praise pleased him, he wasn't used

to it and found himself blushing profusely. Deliberately changing the topic of conversation, he observed, "You cut your hair, Sasaguri-san. It really changes the way you look."

She blinked her big, brown eyes and laughed to herself. "In fact, this is the real me. I was probably overdoing it before. The guy I'm dating now is a real back-to-nature type. I've gotten a lot more laid-back as well."

He really did have a thing for Sasaguri, and he would have liked to have been the one dating her. But he could also honestly say that if she was seeing somebody, then good for her.

"The truth is, I'm seeing somebody too, but we got into a bit of a fight." With Sasaguri having brought up the subject of her love life, he felt compelled to toot his own horn. "I'm dating someone who's a better worker than me, is real pretty, and yet is still incredibly sweet and cute."

He was perhaps going a bit overboard. Sasaguri raised her hand to her mouth, suggesting he ought to tone it down.

"No, seriously. I mean every word. Honestly, I'm finding it hard to measure up."

You don't say, Sasaguri's smiling face said. She did seem happy for him. "Kaitani-kun, you're really in love, aren't you?"

Indeed he was, though he was left somewhat abashed putting his feelings into words. He nodded his head. As they were conversing, the waiter came with Sasaguri's pasta order. Resting her chin in her hands,

Sasaguri twirled the pasta around her fork.

"I hadn't planned on coming in here. Halfway through our date, my boyfriend got called into work. I was hanging around sulking when I saw you." She took a deep breath. "I had to pluck up my courage to talk to you. I thought maybe you were still mad at me. I've worried about it ever since we had that fight and broke up over the telephone. I was hoping I could apologize to you sometime about that. At the time, I didn't have a good idea of the actual circumstances, and I'm sorry for acting as if I did."

At the time, he still hadn't been making any headway with the KASHA dragon design, he'd developed a great deal of unjustified loathing for Fujiwara and couldn't stop badmouthing him and then took it out on Sasaguri, Fujiwara's ex-girlfriend. She'd been right about Fujiwara, though, but he hadn't possessed the grace or humility to accept what she had to say.

"There's no need to apologize. I was the one in the wrong. I realize now how much of a petty bastard I was back then. I really regret laying it all on you."

Their eyes met, and they both laughed at the same time.

"To be honest, that's not all I wanted to talk to you about. There was something else I wanted to tell you, too." She fixed her eyes on him. "I'm grateful for you standing by me after I was dumped by Fujiwara-san."

"But I didn't do anything."

Sasaguri shook her head. "You didn't have to do anything special for me. It was nice just having you there

to talk to. That's what I'm thankful for."

Sasaguri-san sure is nice, Kaitani thought to himself. She was pretty and well-mannered and good-hearted. He suddenly had to wonder why Fujiwara had dumped such a cute girl and hooked up with him instead. He wasn't handsome, wasn't great at his job, and was always pissing him off, though he had gotten more serious about work lately.

Trying to think of what his possible good points might be, he was suddenly struck by a thought that had never occurred to him before. He caught sight of his own two big hands. In elementary, junior high and high school, and even college, he had honed his body with baseball. That's right. He had confidence in his physical attributes. His body was the one thing he could honestly boast was a cut above the average. Fujiwara loved him for his body? It seemed ridiculous, but he couldn't dismiss the possibility, because Fujiwara liked sex so much.

He had a great body—notwithstanding it was a man's body—a great-performing body. Perhaps that's why Fujiwara was fine with him, despite Kaitani being who he was. The frightening conclusion was that if any good-feeling body would do, then it need not be his. It was an unbelievably depressing thought.

"What's the matter, Kaitani-kun?"

His mood lowered as the plausibility of his thoughts sank in. "Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about something. When you've found somebody great, you can't help wondering why they would go out with you in the first place. Maybe it's been a purely physical relationship all along." The forced laughter that followed

was hollow and derisive.

"You shouldn't say things like that!" Sasaguri exclaimed, berating him in a loud voice that sent up shiver down his back. "It's disrespectful to the other person, you know."

"Disrespectful?"

"When you say things like that after your partner has entrusted their feelings with you, aren't you then betraying their trust?"

Her words shot straight into his chest and echoed in his heart.

"Everybody has their good points. The person who falls in love with you is the person who can see them."

The carefree, smiling face that Fujiwara only showed him when they were alone together came to his mind. There was no way he would reveal such a kind and gentle countenance—a countenance born of love—if their relationship was merely physical.

"I'm really ashamed of myself."

He confessed this honestly, and Sasaguri smiled. "I think that when we fall in love, we get swallowed up by the mood, everything turns into a dream, and we can't even understand ourselves. I like you, Kaitani-kun. I don't mean romantically, but when we're together, I feel better about myself. I'm sure your girlfriend feels the same when she's with you."

His spirits at once buoyed up. She was right. Love wasn't about appearances, about his job, or his brains. What was in the heart mattered most—how much he really cared about his partner.

"Hey, isn't that Kaitani?"

Quite out of the blue, Kaitani heard a familiar voice. When he glanced around, there stood Osada, wearing a coat. Standing next to her was a woman who looked about her same age. Kaitani took her to be a friend of Osada's.

"W-What are you doing here at this hour?"

Osada had left work a little after six, thirty minutes before he had. It was now approaching ten o'clock.

"We were on our way home from a movie and we got a little hungry." Osada glanced at Sasaguri, and a knowing smile came to her lips. "Sorry for butting in on you two like this. I'll see you tomorrow!"

"No, no, it's not what you think—" Kaitani hurriedly interjected, but Osada merrily laughed and, humming a little ditty to herself, found a table on the other side of the restaurant.

Sasaguri casually observed under her breath, "Osada from the Sales Planning & Promotion department, I take it. I think she's jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"Hey, it's no skin off my back. I hope this isn't going cause any problems for you."

"Oh, I'm fine. But something like this won't land on you, is it? I mean, an office romance and all."

It was an office romance, one way or another. Kaitani glanced at Osada. Just because she'd seen them talking together didn't necessarily mean she'd tell Fujiwara about it. And even if Fujiwara found out, he'd done nothing to feel guilty about, so he could

deny it forthrightly. On top of that, Sasaguri was the girl Fujiwara had dumped, but Kaitani couldn't see him getting jealous because the two of them were seen talking together.

"It's okay, it's okay."

Kaitani turned back to Sasaguri and smiled.

Chapter 17

It was the day after Kaitani left his letter for Fujiwara. The KASHA sales promotion and merchandising discussion group was pushed forward to one o'clock that afternoon. Osada made an "urgent" request of him, and so he'd been stuck in the reference room all morning searching for a study on the relationship between skin and aging in a corporate CD-ROM database.

All the departments on the floor shared the same reference room, and the place was a mess. On a day like today, getting holed-up and digging through the stacks to find a single CD-ROM was not usual. While making a printout, Kaitani also spotted some related anti-aging data from an overseas medical study, gave it an once-over on the reference room computer, thought it looked useful, and made a copy for Osada as well.

At around eleven-thirty Kaitani handed the results of his search to Osada. Returning to his desk, he saw Fujiwara stand up and leave the office. He checked the scheduling board and saw that Fujiwara had no outside appointments. Perhaps—Kaitani thought, and made a beeline for the place he most likely would have gone.

As he'd supposed, Fujiwara was standing in front of the stylish mirror in the men's lavatory. He looked over his shoulder and fixed Kaitani with a patient, severe and quite angry expression. Kaitani wanted to

slide up to him, but he stood where he was, not closing the several feet of distance between them.

"Did you read my letter?"

"I haven't," he bluntly replied.

"You didn't?" Kaitani almost shouted, quite unintentionally. "But, didn't you open the envelope?"

"I opened the envelope, but did not read the contents."

"When do you think you'll get around to reading it?"

Fujiwara remained mum, refusing to say whether he would read the letter. He slipped past Kaitani, leaving the scent of SHANGRI-LA in his wake.

So, no matter what, he's not going to read the letter. Even after returning to the office, that's all Kaitani could think about. Despite baring his soul, despite putting everything he had down on that piece of paper... Perhaps Fujiwara had no interest in something like a letter. Or perhaps he honestly had no interest in him.

The world faded to black; Kaitani couldn't do his job. In a corner of his mind, he knew that not doing his work would only exhaust Fujiwara's patience further, but he couldn't lift a finger, couldn't think straight. Doing nothing, an hour passed, and it was time for lunch. He was still sitting listlessly in front of his computer when a junior staffer asked him, "Are you skipping lunch?"

He ran down to the company dining room and wolfed down some leftover sushi. The last thing he wanted was for his stomach to start growling in the middle of the meeting.

At precisely one o'clock, in conference room

eight, the KASHA sales promotion and merchandising discussion group began.

The tchotchke they unanimously decided upon was Kaitani's dragon design dog tags. At that point, Fujiwara's cell phone rang. It was apparently a call he had to take, so he ducked out of the meeting, bringing things to a halt.

"I have to wonder what we're going to do about Kaitani's proposal for affixing a scent to the pendant," Osada mused aloud. "Since there are bound to be men who don't like this particular odor, I still don't think it should be part of the package." Osada had been against the fragrance idea all along.

"In that case, can't they just leave the film as-is?" asked a junior staffer, leaning forward. "Then they won't smell anything."

"True," agreed Osada, with a tip of her head. "They could simply leave the film affixed. But," she queried the junior staffer, "isn't it human nature, when you see a sticker like that, to pull it off?"

"Yes, but—"

"Of course it is. What I'm afraid of are the expectations people will develop over what kind of scent it is. I don't want a groundswell of disappointment in response. Such a reaction couldn't help but reflect badly on the product we're promoting."

"A tchotchke is pretty much worth what you paid for it. Even if the consumer doesn't take a liking to this particular fragrance, I can't see them taking it out on the product."

Kaitani listlessly listened to the back-and-forth

over the plan that he'd proposed as if he were an outside observer. Fujiwara at last rejoined the meeting. At once, Osada pressed ahead on the matter of affixing a fragrance sticker to the dog tag tchotchkes.

Fujiwara raised his left hand. "That's enough," he said. "I apologize for coming to a decision well after the fact, but I think we should deploy the dragon design dog tag idea as Kaitani-kun proposed it, using the SHANGRI-LA fragrance."

With a startled look on her face, Osada exchanges glances with the staffers sitting next to her. Kaitani couldn't believe his own ears. He said, "I've been thinking of conducting an end-user opinion survey about the fragrance used with the pendant."

"An end-user opinion survey!" Osada exclaimed. "Have you considered exactly how you would structure such a survey? Even with a basic postcard survey, there's the practical matter of the response rate. No two ways about it, that will be difficult. It's certainly true for women. Will you even collect enough responses from men to reach statistical significance?"

Despite the fact that she was addressing the Section Chief, her questions were pointed and unsparing.

"I was thinking of including a prize or reward along with the KASHA survey."

The buzz of conversation at once filled the room.

"If we adopt the dragon design pendant, we'll use the same steel as the bottles. However, because the raw materials are inexpensive and we have them

in stock, we can push down the unit cost. Because the fragrance that Kaitani-kun proposed was previously manufactured and sold by Cavi as part of a men's skin care line, there are no R&D expenditures. Calculating the sales promotion and merchandising budget in light of these expenses, we've still got room to spare. With those funds, I'd like to offer as a prize an MP3 player sporting the KASHA design."

Fujiwara distributed the materials he'd prepared. A currently popular "Momota" MP3 player, styled to resemble a cell phone, had been customized with the KASHA dragon design. Kaitani's first honest impulse upon seeing it was that he wanted one.

"I've already contacted Momota, the manufacturer. They share the same target demographic as KASHA and would like feedback on their designs as well. So they responded quite favorably."

Fujiwara's talents had shaped Kaitani's plan—that a few minutes ago was writhing in its death throes on the ground—into a thing of meaning and beauty. Kaitani gazed on in stunned amazement.

"I'd like to hear your opinions on what you've heard so far."

Fujiwara's words echoed off the walls of the conference room. No opinions were forthcoming. None could be expected. Sheer wonder was the reason for the silence—the audacity, the boldness of adopting for a merchandising prize a product with as famous a brand name as Momota. Even if the idea had occurred to any one of them, they could not have imagined getting a go-ahead.

"To be honest, I'm still unclear as the purpose behind including the fragrance. However, if a Momota product is offered as a merchandising prize, that's what everybody's going to be talking about. It should dramatically extend the effectiveness of the publicity campaign. And of course, the data on the fragrance would also be expected to reach significant numbers. I can't think of any grounds on which to object."

Osada finished speaking, and the surrounding staffers all nodded. Kaitani's business plan was approved as originally proposed: the dragon design dog tags would be manufactured with the SHANGRI-LA fragrance strip attached.

"Osada-san has thus far been in charge of KASHA sales promotion merchandising, but as her time will be taken up with the next product roll-out, I believe Kaitani-kun should take over. Does anybody have any objections?"

"What, me?" Kaitani blurted out, in response to Fujiwara's sudden nomination, and cast his eyes around the group.

"I think that's a good idea as well," Osada chimed in, smiling at the flustered Kaitani. "He's the right man for the job."

"It's a merchandising tchotchke, and normally not the kind of thing that generates a lot of customer complaints, so give it your best."

"I'm not contesting that, but it isn't the issue here!"

As the sight of the flustered Kaitani, the rest of the staff began to giggle.

Fujiwara said, "I picked you because I believe you can do it. Everybody knows that Osada has her hands full. I've been communicating with Momota thus far, but you'll take over after this. You're going to be very busy."

Because I believe you can do it, Fujiwara had said. If he believed he could do it, then he also expected that he would. He'd made the impression he wanted to. Kaitani rose to his feet and declared in a loud voice, "I'll do it," and for some reason received a round of applause.

The meetings ended at about the one-hour mark, at which point people began to disperse. As they were leaving the conference room, Fujiwara took out his notebook computer and began typing. Kaitani as well lingered behind. After five minute or so, only the two of them remained in the room.

"Um, do you really think I'm right for this?"

Working away as if not aware of his presence, Fujiwara raised his head. "Oh, are you still here?" he muttered to himself, and sighed. "Nobody else voiced any objections. Do you have so little confidence in yourself?"

"Not tons, but I'll do my best. Other than that, there was one other thing that was kind of bothering me. You're not doing this out of favoritism, are you?"

His plan for reviving SHANGRI-LA, once nearly dead and buried in the ground, had at Fujiwara's hand arisen like a phoenix from the ashes and been given a fresh lease on life. But the more he thought about it, Fujiwara had been opposed to the idea all along. And

yet, he'd given Kaitani exactly what he was asking for... and a big bonus on top of that.

Fujiwara looked straight into his eyes and enunciated his words carefully. "You were the one who made the proposal about the pendant and fragrance. It only made sense to put you in charge of the project."

"But you were opposed to using SHANGRI-LA. Why did you set things up like this?"

He narrowed his almond eyes. "It's exactly what you think. This settles the score." His voice seemed to rise from the depths of his chest.

"Settles the score?"

"By authorizing your plan as submitted, think of it as the severance pay on our relationship. Henceforth, we shall have absolutely no contact outside of work."

Kaitani's legs felt as if they were frozen in concrete. "Severance pay?"

"Just what I said. I've taken this opportunity to balance our accounts."

"You can't be serious!" He suddenly felt on the verge of tears. "I'm in love with you. I don't want to split up. I'm sorry for the cruel things I said to you. Please forgive me."

Fujiwara stared emotionlessly at the computer screen, showing no signs of acknowledging his desperate appeals. "I have no feelings for you whatsoever." He spoke without looking at him, his face as impassive as a Noh mask. "All we had together was a physical relationship. I realize that now."

"You're lying!" Kaitani shouted. "That's a lie! You loved me too, didn't you?"

Fujiwara raised his head. "You've got a major problem with your character. Up until now, time and again, you've given me nothing but grief. You only detract from my life. You add nothing to it."

He stopped speaking for a moment. Mortified and close to tears, Kaitani felt the world close in around him.

"If you've got time for idle chit-chat," Fujiwara declared in an especially icy voice, "then get back to your job."

Chapter 18

Soon after arrived back at the office, Kaitani noticed that he wasn't getting any work done. Fujiwara's announcement that they were breaking up was such a shock that nothing registered in his brain. It was as if everybody was suddenly speaking Greek.

Fujiwara returned thirty minutes later. As if nothing had happened, he sat down at his computer and continued to work, his countenance shrouded in ennui. Kaitani felt as if Fujiwara, having inflicted this terrible state of mind upon him, was demonstrating with his calm demeanor that he wasn't giving Kaitani's existence a second thought.

This can't be. This can't be. Those words alone raced around in his head. His body and mind were giving way. He listlessly pushed back his chair and went to the men's lavatory. He went into a stall, put down the lid and sat down. Like a dam breaking, the tears gushed forth. What could he do to make things the way they were before, to go back to being lovers again? No matter how hard he racked his brain, nothing came to his sodden, mush-filled mind.

He went on crying for half an hour until, little by little, he exhausted himself.

His tear ducts still leaking, his eyes leaden, he headed back to the office. With one look at his ravished face, a startled Osada asked, "What's going on!"

"All of a sudden I was overcome with an awful sneezing fit. It's some kind of inflammation, I think."

"What kind of allergies would be affecting you at this time of year?"

"Hard to say," he prevaricated. He sat down at his computer, but all he could do was sit there.

"Are you okay?" one of the junior staffers asked, peering at him with a concerned look on her face.

"It's just a stuffy nose. I'll be all right." Kaitani tried hard to inject some levity into his voice. If it came out that he'd really been weeping, he'd be hounded, and there was no way he could confess that it was because Fujiwara had broken up with him.

He turned to his computer and brought up his browser and pretended he was searching for something, but just kept staring at the same screen. It was frightening, the degree to which his mind was locked on this one thought. He could only think about Fujiwara.

"I heard you and Sasaguri-san were dating."

Kaitani slowly turned around and looked back at the junior staffer. "No, we're not."

"Oh, you shouldn't tell fibs like that," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Because this story checks out. This morning, when you were out, that's all everybody was talking about."

Somehow or other, the rumor must have originated with Osada.

"I heard that too," the occupant of the desk diagonally in front of his broke in. "You're both about the same age. You look good together! But, I get the feeling I'm watching a cat playing with a mouse."

"By which you mean I'm the mouse?"

"Well, it goes without saying, doesn't it?" Osada said, chiming in.

"Sasaguri-san recently gave herself a makeover. Wasn't that due to your influence, Kaitani-senpai?" The junior staffer cheerfully leaned in closer and said, "That's why you're saying that she means nothing to you, isn't it?"

No matter how often he denied it, the two of them wouldn't believe him. "As a casual observer, that's certainly not the sense I got from how the two of you were behaving last night and this morning," Osada quipped.

"Since when have you been observing me?!"

"It's a secret!" Osada said with a grin.

With the two of them steering the subject back toward Kaitani and Sasaguri's alleged relationship, he gradually felt control of the conversation slipping out of his reach. He grasped his hands together and declared, "I swear to you! Sasaguri-san and I are not dating!"

"Even if you're not, you're still friends, aren't you?"

Delving into a sensitive area, he answered delicately. "We do talk on occasion—"

"So, we're talking something more than friends, but still less than lovers?"

Osada and the junior staffer had latched onto the subject like two Dobermans after a piece of meat, and they weren't letting go. Kaitani glanced over his shoulders. Carefully paging through a massive file, Fujiwara was paying no attention to the noisy little

squall swirling around Kaitani's desk.

"We met now and then for a while and exchanged emails, but now there is absolutely nothing going on between us!"

"So, you don't like her?" Having admitted to having a thing for her before, Osada pressed, he couldn't expect them to believe he felt nothing for her now.

"I haven't said anything about not liking anybody, have I?"

"But despite meeting together and emailing each other, wouldn't it be strange for such feelings to fade?"

Kaitani groaned in frustration. "Look, I'll be straight with you. There was a time when I really did like her and thought it'd be nice if we could hook up. But we never did, okay? Right now, both she and I are seeing other people. We're just good friends."

Perhaps because of putting more force into his little speech that was called for, he came up a little short of breath. At that moment, behind him, he heard his name spoken in Fujiwara's stern tone. Startled to discover that Fujiwara had at some point approached him, Kaitani turned around.

"Are you all done with your job and getting bored already?"

"Ah, no."

"Does that mean you're avoiding work and instead engaging in this idle gossip?"

"Forgive me, Section Chief," said Osada, covering for him. "I'm the one who started the conversation with Kaitani."

"I am talking to him," Fujiwara said, glaring

at Kaitani. "That has to do with the assumptions of your duties as the Momota liaison. The particulars are included on this memo." He tossed the file onto his desk, his words stabbing Kaitani in the chest. "If there's anything you don't understand, it's your responsibility to take it up with the Momota rep. You're the man in charge, so you do as you see fit."

Even Osada watched the give and take, her surprise at Fujiwara's brusque and dispassionate manner evident. But in the end, she apologized to Kaitani and said, "Sorry about that. The Section Chief must be in a bad mood today."

Fujiwara had dumped him, froze him out of his life, and turned him into a kicking post. Kaitani felt as if his heart was tumbling down a water slide of his own tears. Still, he had a job to do. His head was still spinning, but he collected his thoughts and put his shoulder to the wheel.

He picked up the Momota file that Fujiwara had pretty much thrown at him. Thinking that it'd be filled with things a person such as himself could not possibly hope to understand, contrary to his expectations, as he read it he found the detailed materials quite easy to follow. It wasn't simply "good enough." Kaitani got the clear sense that it had been prepared with great care and understanding.

With every passing moment, Fujiwara was getting harder and harder for him to figure out.

Chapter 19

After countless negotiations with the Momota rep, Kaitani managed to raise the number of MP3 players sporting the dragon design that would be used as promotional prizes from fifty to one-hundred. Naturally, doubling the number of units doubled the chances of winning, and Kaitani had data that said doing so would increase the participation rate to at least 10 percent.

There was a good deal of fussing over the design, and it took two tries to get it right. When it came to the advertising campaign, he ignored Osada's advice to use the in-house design department, and instead turned to Shiozawa's firm. The in-house staff didn't compete in the real world, and lacking that sense of urgency, they tended toward safe, dull designs that Kaitani hated. At any rate, he was aiming for something stylish—the kind of thing people would want to show off to their friends.

As he became absorbed in each specific detail, almost as a matter of course, the delivery time doubled. To make matters worse, as this was the first project he'd been given sole control over, many things didn't fit together. His overtime hours reached well into December, and got longer by the day.

Standing behind him one day, Osada blurted out, "Frankly, you've been giving me the creeps!"

"Huh?" Kaitani said, turning around. "I've been doing what?"

Osada sighed. "Your work habits. It's all fine and good being devoted to your job, but if you don't kick back now and then and smell the roses, your life is going to head off the rails."

"Yeah, sure," Kaitani muttered, nodding his head.

"You need to take a break and get out of here. Even the Section Chief leaves at the end of the day."

Two hours ago, Fujiwara had left work at closing time; he only had to await the rollout of the KASHA line. The only problematic elements that remained were the sales promotion and merchandising of the pendants, and the lottery for the MP3 players. Osada's upcoming project was still in the developmental stages. As far as Fujiwara's job went, he had some slack in his responsibilities.

"But the Section Chief gets to work early and he probably had a date tonight."

With a casual aside, Osada plunged a dagger in his heart. "During the fall, no rumors at all were floating around, but they seem to have made a comeback. This time, it's apparently a girl from Personnel."

"I don't know anything about that," he said in a small voice, turning his face aside.

"Well, I wouldn't expect you to show much interest in the subject."

There was no way he wouldn't be interesting in that subject. But getting worked up about it would do him no good, so he pretended to know nothing about it. After breaking up with him, Fujiwara started seeing some girl in Administrative Affairs. Two weeks after

that, he broke up with her and started dating the girl in Personnel. According to the hearsay making the rounds among the female staff, when it came to Fujiwara's love life, the Lothario had been reborn.

"Speaking of which, the Section Chief has changed his cologne."

Kaitani was aware of this as well, and with these words Osada twisted the knife in his chest.

"It was a rather piquant brand today. This new fragrance is nice and agrees with him, but SHANGRI-LA always struck me as his signature scent. When it comes to the Section Chief, anything else just doesn't seem to suit him."

Fujiwara had changed his cologne when he started going out with the girl from Personnel. On occasion when they'd be in proximity to each other, Kaitani noted that he was wearing a different scent. It was depressing. Perhaps Fujiwara didn't want to wear the same SHANGRI-LA cologne being used as a sales promotion and merchandising tchotchke. It was more likely, though, that he'd switched because Kaitani liked it, which was much worse.

The fragrance this time was the complete opposite. Kaitani did consider it a crisp, clean scent, but he too felt that the sweeter smell, which by now had some kind of hold on him, suited Fujiwara better.

Picking up her purse as if getting ready to leave, Osada sat down next to him. "Since I joined the firm, the Section Chief has hooked up with—and broken up with—twenty girls that I know of. And all the while, the length of his relationships has become

shorter and shorter. I've got to think there's something wrong with him."

"Wrong with him?"

Osada nodded slightly. "This might not be the best way to phrase it, but no matter what the circumstances, don't you find overdoing something to such a degree rather strange? I've thought so, especially recently. It started about October. The Section Chief was always in a good mood—about the same time he was still getting along well with you, Kaitani. That's when he was thinking about getting married. I wonder why he called it off."

That erroneous supposition was all on him. He'd uttered something in a careless moment, and she'd taken him too seriously and refused to let it go. But he didn't correct her.

"The Section Chief just goes through one girl after another. He's calm, cool and collected while at work, but there's no doubt that in his private life, he's the type that gets lonely if he doesn't have somebody with him. Based on my own experience, that's the sense I get from men who can't be without a woman."

Kaitani had thought that Fujiwara might be lonely. Back when they were in love, they'd get naked and stay frisky all through the night and into the next day, and often bathe together as well. He enjoyed their times together, and while he hadn't been totally conscious of it, when it came to the bedroom, Fujiwara had a hard time performing if he had the slightest difficulty with his partner. Kaitani had to believe he enjoyed it, too.

But all this talk about the past made him desperately sad.

Chapter 20

Starting toward the end of December, Kaitani noticed something odd about Fujiwara's appearance. Observing him day after day, over a period of time he saw that the Section Chief was losing weight. Beyond his usual mask of ennui, his countenance had become noticeably gaunter, enough to make Kaitani worry that something was seriously wrong. But he couldn't ask the man directly.

According to Osada, Fujiwara broke up with the girl from Personnel before Christmas, and hadn't hooked up with anybody since.

The KASHA commercials started running in early February. The "image" ads debuted the first week, alternating between the face of their spokesman and the characters in the KASHA logo. The second week, bringing the dragon design to the fore, the spokesman "swallowed" the dragon and through digital effects, became the fiery beast.

As soon as the ad began running, Cavi was bombarded with inquiries about the fresh, young, college-aged actor who'd signed on as their commercial spokesman. His profile was posted on the company's home page, quelling some of the uproar. But the hubbub made the national news programs, giving KASHA's new brand image an incredible boost.

At a stroke, the increased popularity of KASHA

triggered an exponential growth in retail orders, and even before its formal launch, production quotas for the basic skin care line were raised without delay.

"It feels like we're sailing with an incredible tailwind at our backs."

With the KASHA launch just three days away, Kaitani and Osada went to a lecture by a beauty advisor. It began at one o'clock and ended at three. While they were returning to headquarters, Osada said she was feeling thirsty, and so they went into a self-serve coffee house. They sat down at a round table and drank hot coffee.

"An incredible tailwind," Osada repeated. "KASHA is going to sell so well, certainly more than I would have believed." She excitedly folded her hands together. "It'll be going on-sale any day now. When I go into a store, I only want to see our products disappearing from the KASHA displays."

In contrast to the spirited Osada, Kaitani listened silently, nodding his head with the occasional "Yeah" and "You're right."

"Well, you don't look too thrilled, Kaitani. That dragon design you went to town on will be lining the shelves pretty soon."

"Oh, I'm thrilled, but—"

Osada lightly patted the back of Kaitani's hand. "You're not a happy camper."

Kaitani responded with a forced laugh. He sighed, "I guess it just doesn't mean that much compared to love."

Osada blinked in obvious surprise. "You're not

seeing anybody, Kaitani?"

"I was, but I got dumped. It was incredible at the time, yet with a stupid slip of the tongue, it all turned to dust."

Osada nodded in sympathetic agreement. "A lot of life is like that. I can turn sour on a single note."

"It was my fault. I was being totally insensitive."

"That may be the case, but didn't she go out with you already knowing you were the type to spout off like that?"

Kaitani gulped down the contents of the paper coffee cup. "As much as I'd like to go back to the way things were, I really don't know how."

"The way things were—so, you do still like her."

"I can't think about anybody else. And right now, my old lover isn't seeing anybody. I've got to believe that's there's still hope, that I've still got a chance."

Osada grabbed Kaitani's forelocks and gave him a light tug. "You're such a cutie. I'm telling you to go right over to her place and set things straight."

"I'm too scared."

"Scared?"

"Scared that I'll get dumped all over again."

Osada was quiet for a moment. "Yeah," she agreed with a slight nod. "It is scary. And speaking of scary things, I got an odd phone call for the Section Chief the other day."

"An odd phone call?"

"Indeed," said Osada, knitting her brows. "Get

me the Section Chief!" That's what the caller said. Incredibly rude. I only handled the call, but this person was so haughty and unpleasant. It seemed to me that the Section Chief didn't know how to handle it, either. He just told me not to take any calls from a guy named Tagami."

Kaitani recognized the name. The jerk he and Fujiwara encountered at the tavern, who gave Fujiwara such a hard time about his missing testicle, his name was Tagami. If he was the same guy—Kaitani had a bad feeling about this.

He said, "Perhaps that weird phone call is at the root of his problems. The Section Chief hasn't been himself recently. He's seems depressed, and he's lost a lot of weight. I've heard rumors about him being ill."

"Do you really think so?" Osada asked, lowering her voice to a whisper. "In fact, a while ago, one of the girls saw the Section Chief leaving a big hospital. She thought maybe he'd gone to visit somebody there, but he had such a serious look on his face that she couldn't bring herself to say hello to him. After breaking up with his last girlfriend at the end of December, nobody heard anything about him hooking up with anybody else, right? I thought that was somehow or another at the root of his ill health, but asking him directly was a bust."

Kaitani scratched at the back of his head. He wanted to be with Fujiwara, but couldn't. It bugged him to no end. If he'd been there, Fujiwara could have talked to him about anything. He found the thought deeply frustrating.

They got back to the office at four o'clock, and

Kaitani set his briefcase on the desk and headed to the lavatory. Passing by the galley, he saw the back of a familiar-looking suit and stopped.

Fujiwara took a prescription bottle from the pocket of his suit, tipped out one pill and swallowed it with a gulp of water. Then he rested his hands on the edge of the sink. His shoulders sagging, he let out a big sigh.

"Are you okay?"

At the sound of his voice, the man's back twitched. He quickly spun around. Their eyes met and Fujiwara glared at him.

"There's nothing wrong with me," Fujiwara spat out. He walked out of the galley and pushed by Kaitani, obviously intending to return to the office. Kaitani reflexively grabbed the right arm of the man as they collided. The wasted condition of his muscles—evident through the fabric of the suit—honestly startled him.

His hand still on his right arm, Kaitani dragged him back into the galley. Wrapping his arms around Fujiwara's struggling frame, he quickly understood just how much slighter he'd become.

"Why have you gotten so thin?" Kaitani asked, but Fujiwara averted his gaze and refused to answer. "In fact, you're not doing well at all."

"So I've lost a pound or two," Fujiwara blurted out. "There's nothing wrong with my health."

"You didn't start losing weight for no reason at all!" Kaitani shouted.

Fujiwara slowly nodded.

"Nobody's going to say anything, but we're

all really worried about you." Kaitani firmed his hold, hoping to communicate some of his concerns. But in the moment he felt the touch of Fujiwara's hand on his back, and sensed his stubborn heart opening up toward him, the sound of footsteps raced down the hall. Fujiwara pushed him away and ran out of the galley ahead of him.

In reaction to the push, Kaitani's back struck the wall, and he sat down on the galley floor. He slowly folded his hands together, the sensation of Fujiwara's slight frame still lingering in his fingers. For just a moment, a fleeting moment, he felt that Fujiwara had come back to him. And then left him once again.

Chapter 21

On the fateful eighth day of February, KASHA finally debuted in stores across the country. All that afternoon, additional orders, faxes and emails flooded into the Cavi sales offices. The cheers rose to the heavens. Even in the convenience stores, KASHA merchandise continuously disappeared from the shelves. Catching a ride on the same wave of enthusiasm, sales of hair care and facial cleansing products from the basic cosmetics and skin care lines shot up as well, surpassing earlier predictions.

In an almost frightening development, KASHA easily cleared the annual sales forecasts in a single week, its tremendous momentum showing no signs of stopping. They were all ecstatic that a product that gone through so much trial and error would go to market in the first place, and all the more so that it was being bought in such great numbers.

Elated by the amazing sales, the CEO got everybody together from the Marketing, Sales Planning & Promotion, and R&D departments and threw them a party in recognition of their contributions.

The party was held in the ballroom of a recently completed luxury hotel in downtown Tokyo. Kaitani had a task to tend to at the last minute that he couldn't let slide, so the party had been underway for about thirty minutes by the time he got to the hotel.

The ballroom was jammed. Conspicuous in the middle of the ballroom was Fujiwara and all his female admirers and hangers-on. Attendance at the party was voluntary, and knowing that he had an errand to run and that he'd be late, Kaitani considered giving it a pass. But in the hopes that, amidst the crowds, the two of them could talk without Fujiwara getting his guard up, he decided to participate. As things turned out, with Fujiwara guarded by his phalanx of women, Kaitani couldn't get close to him.

Girls from other departments who rarely had the opportunity to talk to him were taking their chances here. Fujiwara looked depressed and irritated, but Kaitani hardly had the standing to push the girls away, and that realization felt like driving a thousand icy nails into his heart.

Wistfully observing the women flocking around Fujiwara, each possessing the hope of becoming his significant other, Kaitani could do nothing but hate the position he found himself in. From the start, he pushed aside the beer and started guzzling wine. He'd get himself good and drunk and forget all about the aggravation, the melancholy, and the heartrending feelings.

"Keep drinking wine like that and you'll end up totally hammered." When Kaitani turned around, Higashiyama from R&D was looking his way, a wry smile on his lips. "Those dog tags with the fragrance sticker we're using as sales promotion tchotchkes—they're flying out the door as well. Thanks to the promo prizes, the returns on the surveys are through the roof."

"I guess so."

"You wouldn't have any surplus dog tags around, would you?"

"Some samples, I'm sure. Why?"

Higashiyama shrugged. "Seems my sister-in-law took a liking to that fragrance. She was wondering if I could get her one."

"If you're talking about a single set, I'm sure I could find one lying around somewhere. I'll take a look tomorrow at the office."

"Sorry to inconvenience you." Higashiyama lowered his head and whispered in Kaitani's ear, "Your old lover boy is sure something. The girls are lined up three deep."

Kaitani had consulted with Higashiyama about how he might mend a relationship after getting into a fight over a single, careless remark. But he hadn't mentioned that they'd actually broken up. He bowed his head and smiled bitterly. "We've gone our separate ways. We're not seeing each other anymore. That's all behind us."

"Eh?" Higashiyama blurted out, a startled look on his face.

"Yeah, he dumped me."

"I see." Higashiyama hesitated a moment, and then said, "You've got different personalities, but it seems to me it'd make for a nice combination."

Kaitani lifted his head. Higashiyama continued to talk, bringing his mouth close to Kaitani's ear. "I have to think that a kick-back guy like you hanging with a meticulous man like Fujiwara would have the effect of getting him to loosen up and settle down a bit."

The countless times they'd kissed over and over, nuzzling each other—the days they'd played together until their knees went weak—it'd been three months, not yet four, and yet it all seemed so far away. As per usual, the crowd of female admirers surrounding Fujiwara only increased as the evening wore on. Kaitani was seized by the violent impulse to shoo them away and spirit Fujiwara off with him. Taking advantage of the open bar, he drank wine like water and scarfed down the various finger foods. His stomach was stuffed, his head had been skidding down into bottomless pit, and he felt like shit.

Kaitani sat himself in a chair leaning against the wall of the ballroom. A few minutes later, he was out like a light. The next time he opened his eyes, the one thought inflaming his mind was that Fujiwara had thrown him away without any good reason and he simply couldn't let it end like this, not without a single word between them.

He intended to stride right over to him, except that he could barely put one foot ahead of the last. His wine glass shaking in his left hand, he drew closer to his objective. The multitude of strikingly attired women made it look as if Fujiwara was surrounded by a field of flowers. As he approached this blooming, female Praetorian Guard, a path opened up without him so much as raising a hand.

Wary of the staggering lush with the wineglass in his hand, the women in his vicinity simply stepped away. Drunk to the gills, as Kaitani advanced step by step, he felt like the chosen one, Moses parting the Red Sea.

"Oh! Cold!" The girl in front of Fujiwara cried out. Kaitani looked blankly from his now empty wine glass to her once white, and now wine-soaked, knit sweater. He must have spilled the contents of his glass when he bumped into her. The thought entered his brain that it was his fault, but it was taking him forever to get the words out.

The first one to apologize to the girl in the wine-soaked sweater was Fujiwara. "Are you all right? I'm sorry about this."

"I, ah, but—" Glaring at Kaitani, the girl's attention wavered. The drunk had soiled her outfit. What, she wanted to know, was Fujiwara apologizing for?

"This man is one of my subordinates. He looks to be quite intoxicated, and I'm sure he regrets his blunder. As he'll no doubt pick up the dry-cleaning bill, please overlook his clumsiness."

Fujiwara politely nodded his head. Unable to go on being angry, the girl had no choice but to agree.

Fujiwara left the ballroom for a moment. He returned carrying his coat in his left hand, and he nonchalantly draped it over the girl's shoulders. "A friend of mine runs a boutique not too far from here. I think she can set you up with a change of clothes, so may I ask you to accompany me?"

The business with wine having unexpectedly delivered to her this golden opportunity, the girl's face instantly softened. It didn't register with Kaitani that Fujiwara was deftly cleaning up the mess that he had created—only that he was taking off with a girl.

He grabbed Fujiwara by the arm. "I d-don't want you to go." He stuttered on like a child, stopping Fujiwara in his tracks. "Y-You can't go when I'm still here."

At that moment, a sudden crash of noise came from the ballroom entranceway. A man's big, hoarse voice echoed across the hall. "Hey, Fujiwara! Fujiwara-baby! You in here?"

Fujiwara spun around, as if hit by a shot. A man wearing jeans and a polo shirt entered the ballroom, swaying to the left and right as he walked. Perhaps due to his lack of sobriety, his face was as red as a lobster's. He looked like he was in his thirties, and he had the sunburned face of an Okinawan.

I've seen that guy before, Kaitani thought, tipping his head to one side.

"Oh! There you are, Fujiwara-baby!"

At the sound of his name, Fujiwara's face went greener than anything Kaitani had seen before. The Okinawan stumbled up to Fujiwara and managed to shrug his shoulders in an excessively vulgar manner. "All these pretty girls at your beck and call. Aren't you a man among men! Say, then what's this guy doing here?"

The crowd of people surrounding the man suddenly grew in circumference. Nobody wanted anything to do with this mean drunk.

"You've had too much to drink," Fujiwara said, a grave tone in his voice.

The man snickered. "Have a couple on me! You may be a high school pal, but you're such heartless

bastard. Not a drop of human kindness in you." His face clouded melodramatically, as if on the verge of tears. "Won't even take the time to listen to what an old friend has to say."

"If you are referring to your so-called investment opportunity, my reasons for rejecting it should have been clear. I have explained why I cannot put my trust in this new company of yours."

Fujiwara's countenance looked sickly, but his attitude was resolute. Looking at the drunk's face up-close, Kaitani finally remembered who he was. Tagami! The guy who had endlessly tormented Fujiwara back in high school because of his missing testicle. His pickled brains finally made the connection.

"Get out of here. Now." Fujiwara pointed toward the exit.

Tagami showed no signs of leaving. Perhaps out of exasperation, Fujiwara grabbed the man by the arm and forcibly started to escort him out of the ballroom. Tagami roughly shook himself free and shoved Fujiwara away from him. Fujiwara crashed backwards against a table and fell to the floor on his behind.

"So, you're working at this great company and now you think your shit doesn't stink, huh? This is how you're going to repay me after everything I did for you back in high school?"

Fujiwara stood up and lightly brushed off his slacks. "I remember you being the bane of my existence. I've no memory of you ever lifting a finger to help me. If you don't leave right away," he declared in forceful, imperious tones, "we'll be forced to call the

authorities."

After a vexed gnashing of teeth in true Jekyll and Hyde fashion, the man turned his attitude 180° and smiled. "You've risen high in the world. You're not a thing like you were in high school." The man paused to take a breath, shaking his head in an exaggerated manner. Then he shouted in a conspicuously loud voice, "He's only got one of his balls! He's only half a man! Hey—what the fuck—!"

The eyes of the crowd focused on them, Kaitani grabbed the front of Tagami's shirt, jerked the Okinawan around face-to-face, and hit him as hard as he could. Tagami somersaulted onto the floor.

Kaitani swayed back and forth, as if in a mighty wind. "Y-You don't diss Fujiwara-san like that! You hear?"

The man hacked blood onto the carpet and from a low crouch flew at Kaitani's knees. The attack tumbled him to the ground. Lying face-up, the man straddled his midsection and delivered two swift blows to Kaitani's stomach. And he was no amateur.

"Stop it!"

Higashiyama and a bunch of other guys from R&D, along with the hotel staff, pulled Kaitani and the man apart. The two of them glared at each other, their arms pinned behind their backs.

"You try running down Fujiwara-san like that again and you'll pay for it!" Kaitani had taken two to Tagami's one, and was clearly behind on the scorecard. Still, Kaitani continued to snarl at him.

"Screw you! Think I'm kidding? The guy's got

only one, I'm telling you!"

"With only one, Fujiwara's more a man than you'll ever be!"

"Shut your trap, Kaitani!" Higashiyama growled in his ear.

"You get within a mile of Fujiwara-san again, and I'll kill you!"

"Enough, you two!" Fujiwara roared.

Kaitani turned his head. Fujiwara was clenching his fists, his face was white as a sheet and his whole body was trembling. He fixed his eyes on his ex-schoolmate and jutted his chin toward him. "Tagami, no matter how well we may know each other, the baseness of your actions is unforgivable. If you continue to harass me after this, I'll see you in court."

Fujiwara's harsh, cold voice echoed through the ballroom.

"The fact of the matter is, due to an unfortunate incident when I was a child, one of my testicles was removed—" Fujiwara paused. "But what of it?"

Not just admitting to the truth, but tossing it off as if it were nothing—Kaitani couldn't help but thing to himself: He is so cool.

"If you don't wish to take up this matter with police, I suggest you hurry on out of here."

Under the majestic weight of Fujiwara's voice, the man clicked his tongue and half ran out of the ballroom.

"I am sorry that a personal affair of mine should have caused such a ruckus." Fujiwara bowed to the crowd surrounding them. Lastly, Fujiwara came up to

Kaitani. He seemed to want to say something, but was having a hard time getting it out, and could only bite his lip.

So Kaitani spoke up first. "I'm just keeping my promise."

Fujiwara's eyes opened wide.

"Like I told you, if I ever met that guy again, I was going to thrash him." Kaitani bowed his head and laughed to himself. "Though, to be honest, it completely slipped my mind until now—"

He quickly pressed his hands over his mouth, tasting the bitter fluids climbing his throat. Those two body blows had really done the job on him, and the contents of his stomach had decided to leave the way they came in. He needed to get to the bathroom, but if he moved in the slightest, he was going to toss his cookies right here on the carpet.

"Kaitani?"

Kaitani couldn't answer. If he opened his mouth to speak, it was all coming out.

Fujiwara delicately held a bundle of cloth up to his face. "It's okay. You can throw up here."

No way, he thought, at the same time vomiting onto the high-class suit coat. Fujiwara softly stroked his back as he heaved, and when his alimentary tract had finally quieted down sufficiently, he escorted him to the lavatory. There, Kaitani puked up even more. Having been pummeled in the solar plexus on a full stomach, the pit of his guts continued to painfully twitch and cramp. Embracing the toilet, he retched bile until he lost consciousness.

Chapter 22

When Kaitani came to, he was in a room he recognized, lying on the bed that for months he'd been longing for. This was the room he'd visited frequently until three months ago, when its doors were closed to him. Fujiwara's bedroom.

He sat up on the bed and realized he had on just a pair of undershorts. He'd gotten into a fistfight with the Okinawan at the company party, the man had slugged him in the stomach, and he'd hacked his guts out in the hotel lavatory. He didn't remember anything after that.

The inside of Kaitani's mouth tasted like death warmed-over. He got out of bed and went to the bathroom and rinsed out his mouth.

Fujiwara wasn't in the bedroom. He was stretched out on the sofa in the living room, asleep; his sleeping face was beautiful. Kaitani knelt down next to him and stared at his slumbering countenance. Fujiwara's right arm was flung out from the sofa, hanging limply by his side. Kaitani grasped his hand and pressed it to his cheek.

Fujiwara's fingers fluttered, as if possessed of a will of their own, and tried to shake him off. Kaitani didn't want to break this connection to him, and did not release his hold.

"Let go of my hand, please."

"I don't want to."

Kaitani clenched his fingers tighter. But simply holding his hand gave him no idea of what to do next. Though connected only through the tips of their fingers, he was at a loss for words. And though he didn't know what to say, something was being communicated. Something raced through his heart. He resolutely raised himself up, and kissed the somewhat frightened-looking man on the mouth.

Fujiwara did not avoid the kiss. His body trembled, but he did not push him away. Kaitani climbed onto the couch and covered Fujiwara's body with his own.

"K-Kaitani—"

Kaitani continued to hug him with all his strength.

"—I can't breath."

In response to his strained plea, Kaitani loosened his hold, though only slightly.

"Let me tell you something," Fujiwara said.

"Sure," answered Kaitani, kissing his cheek.

"When you clobbered that guy for me, it really made me feel good." Fujiwara spoke in a quiet voice.

Kaitani ran his hand through Fujiwara's soft hair. "It was so amazing when you laid it on the line and declared that you only had one of your testicles."

Fujiwara blinked. "Don't be silly—"

"You really were great."

The way Fujiwara bashfully nodded his head was so cute. Kaitani rocked his body as he hugged him.

"I've always hated the fact that I only have one testicle. However, you insisted so vehemently that it was

cute that I had to take an honest look at myself as well. As you might expect, I just couldn't agree with you on that point. Still, when I think about how good a guy you are, and how all the things I fuss about don't amount to much, I suddenly turned defiant—"

Kaitani brushed his cheek. "I love you." The man in his arms trembled. "You're the only person I've ever loved like this." He traced the contours of the lips awaiting his kiss with his forefinger. "And you love me, too. So, why did you dump me?"

Since he'd embraced Fujiwara at work in the galley, he felt assured that this was the case. Fujiwara clumsily averted his gaze, and Kaitani pressed on. "I'm sorry about the awful things I said. I really wanted to apologize to you." He bowed his damp, mussed-up hair toward Fujiwara. "I got dumped, but I never gave up."

"Neither did I—" Fujiwara started to say, but Kaitani held his lips closed.

"Tell me why you dumped me."

"And I suppose that, no matter what, you won't relent until I do."

"Well, not no matter what, but I do want to know."

Fujiwara touched his hand to his forehead and squirmed a bit. "It was painful to hear you call me a 'female.' But I figured it was a figure of speech, so that's not what made me angry. After reflecting on things, I intended to forgive you. I lied when I said I hadn't read your letter. I was overjoyed to get it. This business with the prizes for KASHA—I put things aside and set about bringing your plan to fruition. Using all the connections

I could think of, I arranged a meeting with Momota. Then I heard that you'd hooked up with that woman, and my mind went blank. I couldn't concentrate on my work. I was so frightened it made me tremble. That was when I thought I'd better nip things in the bud between the two of us."

"But, why? I don't understand what you're saying."

"I knew people were jumping to conclusions. But if it turned out to be true, it would too unbearable."

"Didn't I tell you how much I loved you?"

Fujiwara gave Kaitani a hard, long look. "Where is it guaranteed that nobody's feelings will ever change their whole life? You're the only one who's seen my testicle since I became an adult. You're the only one I've ever had sex with that way. Having shown you the most compromising aspects of myself, the possibility that you might betray me—"

"Am I special to you?" Kaitani whispered in his ear. "Am I an important person in your life?"

Fujiwara nodded, his bowed head almost seeming to tremble. "After we split up, I was really lonely. I started dating women again. However, it wasn't enjoyable as it was before. All I could think about was you—"

Fujiwara's words ended mid-sentence as Kaitani planted a wet, hot kiss upon his mouth and fondled his nipples through his shirt. When his right hand snuck down between Fujiwara's legs, he immediately seized it.

"Hold on a minute!"

"I love you," Kaitani gasped, pressing his hard desire against Fujiwara's groin.

"Kaitani, listen to me!" he commanded in a harsh voice.

In this state of mind, Kaitani was like a dog with its mouth wide open, ready to sink its teeth into a tender piece of meat. Incapable of cooling his hot blood, he licked Fujiwara's cheeks.

"Your body has gone downhill since last year."

Fujiwara nodded. "I went to the hospital, but they said it was due to stress and emotional issues, and there was nothing physical to repair."

"Where does it hurt?"

"I'm not saying it hurts anywhere, but—"

"But—"

"I can't get it up," he confessed in a desperately small voice. "No matter what I do. Drugs don't help. That's why today—"

Kaitani nipped at Fujiwara's earlobe. "You won't feel better until you can?"

"Not necessarily. The sensation is there, and I can ejaculate. But it won't get hard—"

"Show me."

Against Fujiwara's wishes, Kaitani stripped off his pajama bottoms and undershorts. Fujiwara's manhood lay there limply to one side.

"It's pretty."

"Don't look," Fujiwara said, covering his groin with his hands.

"Erect or no, either way it's pretty. You've got a pretty one." Kaitani kissed him. "Incredibly pretty. You

can only show it to me."

The body he was holding in his arms trembled slightly.

"It's such a cute shade of pink. You can only let me touch it."

"Even if you touch it, it's hardly enjoyable. That's why—"

"It's enjoyable to me. And since it's yours, I want to touch it and lick it. Show it to me. Show me!"

He pestered and coaxed him and until Fujiwara removed his hands from his crotch. Even observing his cock lying there in his flaccid state, Kaitani got so excited he felt as if his face were on fire. He tightly closed his eyes—his face flushed to an unbearable degree—and lapped at Fujiwara's beautiful face like a panting dog.

"It's pretty, so incredibly pretty," he whispered in Fujiwara's ear, in-between strokes of his tongue.

Perhaps because Kaitani's long, heavy breaths tickled his skin, Fujiwara scrunched up his shoulders.

"Ah" At the same time Kaitani penetrated him, a modest gasp escaped his lips. Fujiwara clasped both hands over his mouth.

"Let me hear your cries of pleasure."

Fujiwara shook his head, his face scarlet.

"When I hear you make sounds like that, it really makes me feel good. Don't hold back on my account."

Fujiwara stubbornly refused. Kaitani forcibly removed his hands from his mouth, and rocked his hips back and forth.

"No . . . no . . . ahh . . . ahh . . . I don't want this!" Tears spilled from the corners of his eyes.

"What's the matter? It's all good, isn't it? You're feeling better—"

"No. I can't stand moaning and groaning like a woman. And even if I didn't, there's something wrong with me"

This was not a remark that Kaitani could overlook. "There's nothing wrong with you, Fujiwara-san."

Fujiwara shook his head back and forth. "There is something wrong with me. Since the first time you took advantage of me and had physical relations with me, I get off on anal sex. When you're thrusting inside of me, the feelings are so intense I almost go into a trance. It's better than doing it with a woman. Despite knowing who my partner is, I can't refuse, and then little by little—this is not what ordinary men do!"

As Fujiwara was saying that he got off on anal sex, his ass writhed and trembled, lasciviously devouring him.

"There's nothing wrong at all." Fujiwara hugged him even tighter. "It's because you love me. That's why it feels good. It's me, and I love Fujiwara-san more than anything. That's why nothing else can compare."

As he spoke, Kaitani moved his hips back and forth.

"No . . . don't . . . stop moving!"

"The sensations are more intense when I stir things up like this. It feels a lot better."

"No, no, no. Even if you don't, I'm still impotent."

Kaitani glanced down and checked things out.

Lying together in the missionary position, Fujiwara's member rubbed against Kaitani stomach and began to stand up of its own accord, as a few drops of nectar issuing forth.

"Hey, you're getting hard."

In evident surprise, Fujiwara raised himself—Kaitani still inside him—and stared at his erection. As if reaching out to touch some fearsome object, he carefully touched his erect penis.

"It is hard. I don't believe it. That really is mine."

"Mine is inside you, so there's no doubt. It's all yours."

"I really got erect. How can this be?"

Kaitani firmly grasped Fujiwara's erection, which was now dripping with precum. Fujiwara cried out, throwing his head backward.

Kaitani smiled. "It looks like you're all-better now."

Fujiwara furrowed his brows. "I don't understand. Why, and all so suddenly?"

"I know," Kaitani said, getting Fujiwara's attention. "Because you love me. You're crazy about me and you can't have sex with anybody but me. Your body just happens to be a lot more honest about it than your nitpicking head."

Kaitani averted his eyes and shook his head.

"Admit it. You love me."

Fujiwara cast down his eyes and nodded. Then he then slowly reached down to where they were joined together and softly stroked the base of Kaitani's cock.

"When I say that I like this—"

"I love you. And this is for the exclusive use of the Section Chief as well. I'll enter you, lick you, touch you—do whatever you want."

A furrow momentarily appeared between Fujiwara's brows. "Even though you say you'll do whatever I want, aren't I the one always servicing you?"

Kaitani silenced his objections with a kiss. As if to cajole and persuade him, he rocked his hips back and forth. Fujiwara's gasps and groans outnumbered his complaints. "No, no," he said with a slight shake of his head, and then both he and Kaitani came together.

Chapter 23

The KASHA product launch was met with stunning numbers, but that didn't mean they could count on record-breaking numbers rolling in indefinitely. Predicting how long they might hope to maintain sales at this high level, when the decline would begin, and at what level the rush would level off turned into something of a competition.

Sales for each product line were calculated in daily, weekly, and monthly increments, but when the quarterly financials were released (also known as the "devil's quarter")—the definitive indicator of the start of any downward trend—the KASHA line was still holding its own at two-thirds of peak sales.

Investigations into how and why KASHA was protecting its commanding market share revealed an unusually high rate of repeat sales. Moreover, leading repeat sales was the reformulated skin lotion, with its thick, languid texture. Purchases were initially driven by the bottle design or the novelty of the ad campaign, but after that, the data suggested that the impetus to continue buying came from the efficaciousness of the product itself.

Within the returning data, the feedback on SHANGRI-LA revealed some unexpected results. It had originated as a men's cologne, but its use as a fragrance had spread by word-of-mouth among the high school

female demographic.

Three months had passed by the time its popularity began to grow. The launch campaign had naturally concluded by then. Because the fragrance was out of stock, it was extremely difficult for anybody to get their hands on. And when people understood that it wasn't available, suddenly curiosity peaked. Rumors abounded about this "phantom fragrance," and as with its companion product, and the inquiries poured into Cavi headquarters.

Midway through May, during lunchtime, Fujiwara called Kaitani into the resource room. He said, "I'd like you to work as the primary on this product."

Kaitani looked at the paper he was handed, and without thinking responded, "But this is—!"

"It's been decided that a limited release of SHANGRI-LA, marketed to women, will be offered as part of the LYRIC product line at this summer's trade fair. I'm putting you in charge of it."

Kaitani was aware that SHANGRI-LA had become a popular subject among high school girls. He'd also heard rumors to the effect that the higher-ups at Cavi were scheduling the re-release of SHANGRI-LA to take advantage of this, but no other details had been forthcoming. Kaitani had been on pins and needles, wondering when the go-ahead would come.

"I'm sure you can handle it. Give it your best."

Kaitani took the business plan and glanced at Fujiwara with upturned eyes. "Um—I'm really happy that the product is being re-released, but aren't women in their twenties the target demographic for LYRIC?"

"That is true."

"As far as I'm concerned, speaking of the original audience of the product, wasn't SHANGRI-LA a men's cologne?"

Fujiwara smiled a thin, meaningful smile. He plucked the business plan from Kaitani's hand. "If this project doesn't meet with your approval, I can't always assign it to somebody else."

"I-I'll do it! Please, let me. It's not that I don't like it, but when I think about it no longer being marketed to men, it's kind of disappointing."

Fujiwara returned the business plan to Kaitani; he stared at the SHANGRI-LA logo that would soon spring back to life as a woman's perfume. Fujiwara stepped up next to him and glanced over the document. "I think it's a pretty good plan. No matter how you look at it, there'd be a lot of risk involved with selling SHANGRI-LA as a men's product. But initially, as just a giveaway at a trade fair for women, we've got nothing to worry about. I wasn't sure at first how this would all turn out, but that we've made it this far is the product of your particular enthusiasm. I really have to thank you."

The two colleagues looked at each other. Kaitani had to believe that with those simple words of thankfulness, Fujiwara had undone the one, haunting mistake in his past. Kaitani placed the business plan on a nearby shelf and gave Fujiwara a firm hug.

"Have I given you enough reasons to think better of me now?"

Fujiwara chuckled. "Yes, more than enough."

"Well, then, give me the special treatment, and I



really will pull out all the stops."

"Aren't I already?" Fujiwara lowered his gaze.

"The more special the treatment—the nicer you are to me—then the better the results will be."

And what kind of results are we talking about? Fujiwara's eyes asked him. With all his might, Kaitani scooped Fujiwara up in his arms. Startled, Fujiwara clung to him, his arms around his neck.

"How about we go back to the office like this?" he asked. Kaitani caught the aroma of SHANGRI-LA wafting up from behind his ears.

"Anything but that," Fujiwara murmured, reaching up to kiss Kaitani on the lips.

END



Afterword

Thank you again for taking the time to read the second volume of *The Man Who Doesn't Take Off His Clothes*. I'm pleased that you were able to continue from volume one without too long of a wait.

When I first began writing this novel, I didn't think that it would turn into the marathon it was. Of all the things I've written, this is probably the longest. And because of its length, there was many a time when I found myself on the verge of tears, feeling as if I would never get to the end. But I have finally arrived, to my great relief.

Continuing from the first volume, Yuki Shimizu graciously provided the illustrations. I really am thankful for all the work she's done, making time for me amidst her other pressing concerns. During the rough voyage of writing this story, I was somehow able to bring things to a close, largely encouraged by the artwork for the front cover. After giving it a lot of thought, I requested cover art showing as much skin as you might see in a pinup. Sorry about that! Kaitani looks so fine on the cover that I can't help feeling that I'm just not worthy in comparison.

As always, I can't forget my ever-helpful editor, to whom I am greatly indebted. I have to apologize for inviting her into my happy little hell. This time around, I made the unfortunate discovery—through personal

experience—that a person can continue to function on no sleep. Next time I plan to give myself a wider margin of error and meet my deadlines with more room to spare. But even after promising to clean up my act, year in and year out, I sorrowfully succumb to my slovenly old ways. Until next time, I beg you not to give up on me.

To my good and faithful readers, I must admit that I could have improved things here and there, but had to settle for some incomplete combustion. And while I have the feeling that there's still more I could have done, the story of these two has, for now, come to its conclusion. I'd love it if I could leave you with the feeling that, at the close of the book, Kaitani has grown up a bit. You never know, though. Plot material and scenes that never made it into the final manuscript may at some point still show up somewhere else.

After reading the first volume, my friends, those guardians of the headwaters of my soul, were good enough to encourage me, saying, "If you want it to turn out like this, you should definitely do that." But I get the feeling I pretty much finished without taking their advice, though I could come up with a mountain of explanations for why I did what I did to end things the way I did.

Best wishes until next time. I've haven't yet decided what my next book will be about, but it's great knowing we'll get to meet again soon.

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